

**The Magic in this
Other World is Too
Far Behind!
Volume 7**

Gamei Hitsuji

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The
Magic
in this Other World
is Too Far Behind!



Gamei Hitsuji
Illustration=Ao Nekonabe

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World is Too Far Behind!

7

Gamei Hitsuji
illustration=Ao Nekonabe



"...You're on."

Yakagi Suimei

Eanru

"Then it's
decided.
Just for
now, I will
entrust my
back to
you."



“UGH! WH...AT
IN ALL THE H...
ELLS ARE YOU
DO... ING?!”

“Bring
back
Mizuki.”

Io Kuzami (Anou Mizuki)

Liliana Zandyke



Prologue *The Possessed Woman*

Chapter 1 *At the Yakagi Residence*

Chapter 2 *Bad News Always Comes With Bad Weather*

Chapter 3 *Their Respective Battles*

Chapter 4 *So That I Can Be Myself*

Epilogue *The Greed of Ten*

contents

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7

Illustration: Ao Nekonabe

Prologue: The Possessed Woman

Presently, there was a slight tension filling the air in the alleyway where the Yakagi residence was located in the Nelferian Empire. However, it wasn't the kind of tension that preceded a fight or heralded some ominous turn of events. To draw a comparison, it was more like the moment during a summoning spell where the summoner confronts the summoned devil. It was the tension of two powerful forces sizing each other up.

And those two powerful forces in this case happened to be Yakagi Suimei and the girl standing before him. She wore fingerless gloves and a red muffler over top of her school uniform. Fashion-wise, it certainly gave off a strong impression. She also had long, glossy black hair, and a charming face with large, round eyes. This was Suimei's good friend, Anou Mizuki. Or at least, she was supposed to be. The tension between the two of them suggested something was amiss. But that wasn't all.

Mizuki had black eyes, but this girl stared down Suimei with her odd eyes—one black and one gold. Mizuki always wore a gentle smile, but this girl wore the provoking smile of a fiend. Indeed, something had come over her. She was different. Yes, right now, she was Io Kuzami—or so she called herself.

Just how long had they been standing there like this? Suimei and Io Kuzami's gazes simply collided in silence. Eventually, she made an exasperated expression like she'd grown tired of waiting.

"So, isn't it about time that you let me through?"

"...Frankly, I don't want to let some weirdo like you into my house."

"Hmph!"

At Suimei's declaration, Io Kuzami's face became stern. It wasn't all that surprising, really. She was a being whose true nature was completely unknown, so Suimei's grievances with her were quite understandable. However, it was also understandable that she'd be somewhat irked over it. And she was just about to say something about it when...

"But... it's not like I can just turn you away."

As if implying that he would allow her inside after all, Suimei turned to go into the house himself. It certainly didn't sit right with him to let such a suspicious being into his home, but nothing would

come of continuing this stalemate. And if he drove her away here, he would lose the chance to learn anything about her. That wasn't a price he was willing to pay.

Suimei wanted to know just what she was and ascertain whether or not she would cause any harm. In order to come to such conclusions, he'd have to observe her. He'd have to analyze everything she said and did. And to that end, things would just be simpler if he let her inside. But Io Kuzami broke out in mocking laughter at his behavior.

"You're quite a conundrum for a human, aren't you, bastard? Despite wanting to live a simplistic life, you can't help but be drawn in by the darkness of theory and mystery. Aren't you just going to get yourself in trouble that way?"



“Shut it. What kind of magician doesn’t entrench himself in theory and mystery? Puzzling over every little thing to arrive at your own conclusion... That’s where magicka first takes shape, right? Consider curiosity an occupational disease. Denying me that would be like denying me food.”

Suimei spoke somewhat bluntly out of irritation, but Io Kuzami was unchanged. She continued speaking in her own frivolous way and narrowed her eyes at him.

“So? Will you let me inside or not?”

“...Is it true that you mean no harm?”

“I hate idle chatter.”

“That’s rich, coming from someone who spouts meaningless crap all they want.”

“Hmph. If I meant you harm, I would have taken action while you were all none the wiser. Don’t you understand that much without me having to explain every little detail?”

“I’m just making sure. If you’re not going to tell me everything, I at least want to hear you say you’re not going to do anything.”

“Do you really think I would lie?”

“That’s why I’m saying I want to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

The reason Suimei was being so persistent was to keep Io Kuzami in check. In this kind of uneven exchange, she didn’t even have to lie to have him at a disadvantage. All she had to do was keep silent. That’s why Suimei had to pin her down and make her say that she meant no harm. If she were a pure spirit, lying should be beneath her. And eventually, she shrunk back like she was relenting.

“I have no intention of bringing harm upon you bastards. If I did, I wouldn’t have saved them.”

“Then let me ask you: what are you getting out of all this?”

“To accept my kindness so ungraciously... You’re quite a pill, aren’t you?”

“That’s my job. Reiji and Mizuki are good people, so I have to be the one who’s distrusting.”

“My, even the parts of you that aren’t softhearted are naive.”

With that, Io Kuzami let out a delighted laugh as Suimei bitterly clenched his jaw and turned away. He then raised his hand and beckoned her over with a single finger. Seeing this gesture, she declared him insolent, but complied nonetheless. He really couldn’t get a read on her.

“...”

Suimei casually peeked out of the corner of his eye at the cats loitering in the alleyway. They were naturally sensitive to the

presence of evil spirits, and would react to any threat that Io Kuzami posed. But they simply continued lounging, playing, and meowing as she approached. At the very least, that had to mean that Mizuki wasn't possessed by the devil. That alleviated one of Suimei's worries, but there were still other dark possibilities, so he had to keep his guard up. As Suimei walked with Io Kuzami inside and showed her to the living room, he realized everyone was there but Liliana.

"Menia, where's Liliana?"

"Lily is in the middle of getting her cat refresher. It seems she took several of them to her room to play with."

"I see."

After being away from her feline friends for so long, Liliana wanted to play and cuddle with them as much as she could.

"Well, even if everyone is not gathered, I do not particularly mind."

"Why are you suddenly acting so damn self-important?"

After being let in, Io Kuzami was acting excessively haughty again. Suimei was simply unable to hold in his astonishment in her wake. He looked at her questioningly, as if to ask what the hell she was talking about. But that ignited a smirk on her face. One that was perhaps the first flash of a very dangerous fire.

"You hear me, my worthy rival? I am greatness incarnate. I surpass any and all, even in the extremities of this universe. You shall show me the respect one would show their master. Rather, I will deign to allow you the privilege of doing so once every ten days. I won't ask you to lick my buttocks, but I will at least allow you to lick the dirt off the soles of my shoes."

"Who's going to lick what now? Listen, if you want people groveling for you, go found a new religion or something. You'd get much better results."

"Ooh! That is also a grand idea. Behold, bastards. You stand on the cusp, the eve of a new religion. The organization's name will be the Cult of the Dark Mother... No, Children of the Third Law of—"

"Hey, enough! Just stop! There's so much wrong with this!"

"What are you saying? Were you not the one who told me to do so?"

"I didn't mean to actually go out and do it, damn it."

Even as Suimei yelled, Io Kuzami indulged in spinning her nonsense with alarming fluency. Suimei gave her all manner of looks—imploping ones, dirty ones, judgmental ones. But all she did was continue to smirk in dark satisfaction like she was toying with him.

"Are you listening? When I addressed you, it was as a worthy opponent. In other words, a rival. Do you honestly believe that I would simply bend to a rival's wishes?"

“AAAAAH! Talking to you feels like beating my head against a wall, daaamn iiiit!”

Even Suimei was at his wits' end trying to have a conversation with Io Kuzami. And the fact that she was making it difficult on purpose only made it worse. Witnessing this exchange between them, Felmenia and Lefille were both staring in agape wonderment.

“It's something, isn't it?”

“It certainly is...”

They had never seen anyone play Suimei so. Gaius and Rumea had been able to get the better of him from time to time, but this was something else altogether. In the middle of observing it, Felmenia posed a puzzled question to the frustrated Suimei.

“Um, Suimei-dono... Just what was it that caused Mizuki-dono to end up like this?”

“That's... I don't really know myself, but she'll probably stay this way until she goes back to normal.”

“I-I see...”

Suimei's somewhat defeated answer was quite out of character for him. It sounded like he was just throwing his hands up in the air. Felmenia didn't quite know how to respond and simply gave an acquiescing reply.

Meanwhile, Reiji was scratching his head and muttering, “What did she call it? My dark history? My dark history... Hahaha...”

Suimei understood his pain all too well, but the girls—Titania included—barely knew what to make of all this.

“Anyway... Shall we talk in detail about what went on after we split up?”

“Yeah, let's. I also think that's what we should be prioritizing here.”

“Indeed. Then let us begin, bastards.”

“That's enough from you already! Just take a damn seat!”

Io Kuzami took her seat at Suimei's shouting, and he began to tell the story of what had happened since they'd seen each other last.

Chapter 1: At the Yakagi Residence

“So that’s what you guys have been through?” Reiji muttered in a serious tone after Suimei shared the details of their adventure in the Alliance.

“Yeah,” Suimei replied with a typical shrug. “What can I say? It was pretty rough.”

“But to think even your childhood friend got summoned...”

“Heck of a coincidence, huh? When I found out she also had amnesia as a bonus, I really panicked...”

Talking about it, Suimei reminisced a little over what had happened upon arriving in the Alliance. After catching a glimpse of Hatsumi by chance at the parade, he’d gone to see her. She claimed not to know him, however, and nearly cut him down on the spot. All in all, it was quite an ordeal.

“But thank goodness,” Reiji said with a relieved smile. “Surely it would have worried you more if she hadn’t regained her memories.”

“You can say that again.”

In the end, Hatsumi’s amnesia was resolved. It was a fortunate turn of events that Reiji celebrated as Suimei’s friend. But it seemed something else was going on. Reiji was giving everyone a bright smile, but there was unease in his eyes.

“It really is great it all worked out. Really...”

The cause of the gloomy tone in Reiji’s voice was the girl sitting next to him. Even Suimei, who didn’t have a remarkable talent for reading others, took note of the shadow that had fallen over his friend. And he had a fairly good idea as to what it meant.

In short, Reiji was envious that Suimei and his party had all returned safely. But Reiji wasn’t exactly the type to feel or express jealousy; it more manifested as exhaustion. And it wasn’t hard to imagine why he was so haggard after returning to the Empire with Io Kuzami in tow.

Sensing all this, Suimei sighed heavily. Reiji was a good friend and, as such, Suimei couldn’t just ignore his problems. But alas, there was more than just that on the table currently.

“So, did you leave Hero Hatsumi behind in the Alliance?” asked Titania.

Suimei nodded, but Felmenia took up the story from there.

“Hatsumi-dono has her own battle she wishes to fight. Suimei-

don't respected this, and decided to part ways with her for the time being."

"Suimei, are you alright with that?"

"I have to be. If she's got her own business to take care of, I wouldn't be helping anything by dragging her along with me."

"But she may cross paths with something dangerous in the Alliance, no?"

Reiji reacted upon hearing Titania say, "something dangerous."

"Yeah. You mentioned those Universal Apostles or whatever, right?"

The Universal Apostles were the mysterious group formed by Eanru, Clarissa, Jillbert, and the mirage man they'd met during the riot in the capital of Miazen. They were the ones manipulating the Anti-Goddess Cult behind the curtain, and they were currently scheming to kidnap Hatsumi. Indeed, Suimei was keenly aware of them.

Every one of them was a formidable enemy that could singlehandedly drive the members of Suimei's party into a corner. They were strong—almost absurdly so—and couldn't be dealt with by ordinary means. As things stood, they were arguably more of a menace than the demon threat.

But despite their presence, Suimei had left Hatsumi in the Alliance. He couldn't say he'd done so without hesitation or concern, but he'd done what he thought he had to.

"Honestly, those guys would still be a problem even if she'd come with me, right? We don't have any way of knowing when or where they'll attack. No matter what we do or how we approach this, we'll never have the initiative. So the best we can do in the meantime is have Hatsumi take care of her business as quickly as possible while I find a way to return. That's the size of it. Anyways, more importantly..."

When Suimei foreshadowed a change of subject, Reiji already seemed to know what he was implying. He folded his arms and began groaning.

"You're saying we might also be targeted, aren't you?"

"After what they said about heroes, yeah."

"A scheme that involves the heroes, huh? What a mysterious group..."

Suimei himself wasn't sure what they meant to do by kidnapping the heroes, and without that information, there wasn't much he could say to comfort his friend. Pondering it all, he turned to Lefille. Among the Universal Apostles was Jillbert, who she'd gotten close with in the Empire. She perhaps had the most complex feelings about their new enemies after being forced to fight a friend. As the room filled with a

heavy silence, Reiji changed the subject.

“So, we’re up next, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Indeed.”

As Reiji spoke, both Titania and Io Kuzami nodded. Suimei had heard about why they’d gone to the self-governed state in the first place, but he’d only gotten a rough outline of what had happened there. That included retrieving the relic and being attacked by a demon general—both of which were things that greatly interested Suimei’s group.

“Well, candidly speaking... After we parted ways with you guys, we went to see if we could get the hero’s relic in the self-governed state to compensate for our lack of power.”

Reiji opened with a concise explanation, and each member of Suimei’s group nodded to urge him to continue.

“Upon arriving, we learned a bit about the relic from the person in charge of the temple and were eventually taken to a deep, sealed chamber where it was kept. It was there that someone claiming to be a demon general attacked us. We fought him off— No, he let us off. After that, we made our way back here to the Empire.”

It was the same outline he’d given when they reunited outside. Hearing the story once more, Felmenia muttered in a puzzled tone...

“Attacked by a demon general...?”

Suimei also found it unexpected that a demon general would directly confront Reiji. Especially considering the circumstances. Nobody should have known that he and his party were in the self-governed state on such a mission.

“Does this mean that the demons have predicted Reiji-kun’s actions?” Lefille asked.

Titania shook her head.

“No, that did not seem to be the case.”

“Meaning?”

“The demon general did not know that a hero would be present where the relic was enshrined. He only identified Reiji-sama as a hero after hearing his name.”

“He called himself Ilzarl, but it seemed like that man’s real goal was the hero’s relic.”

“I see. So their plan was to confiscate a potential threat.”

It was likely exactly as Lefille suspected. There was plenty of reason to believe a modern hero would eventually seek out the legendary weapon. And since three of the demon generals had already been cut down, the rest were likely anxious to do away with any possible advantage the heroes might gain over them. Pondering all this, Suimei suddenly looked up at Reiji.

“Say... You just referred to the demon general as ‘that man,’ didn’t you?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“That sort of makes it sound like he was human, so I was just a little curious why you phrased it that way. Did he look like one to you?”

“Huh, I guess you’re right... But yeah, he did.”

After hearing what Suimei said, Reiji seemed to realize what he was talking about and nodded. Up until now, the demons and demon generals that Suimei had come across were all beings that were quite distinctly inhuman in one way or another—so much so that gender was an afterthought when looking at one. Naturally there was probably a difference between the sexes, but it wasn’t visually obvious in the way it was with humans. Yet Reiji had distinctly described this one as a man. In other words, this demon at least had the outward appearance of a human male.

“When he first showed up, we didn’t even think he was a demon. He just looked like a human. A weird one, but a human nonetheless... So yeah, thinking back on it, I guess that is pretty remarkable.”

“So when you said you were ‘let off,’ Reiji-dono, did that have some kind of connection to his peculiarity?”

“Mm. That guy was amazingly tough. Even when we all fought together, we could barely scratch him.”

“That...”

“So it was hard even with Reiji’s divine blessing, huh?”

Hearing what Reiji said, Suimei put his hand to his chin and groaned. It was true that Reiji was a complete amateur before coming to this world, but Suimei didn’t think he was weak by any means. He’d fought with demons, defeated Rajas, and competed against Elliot. For there to be an opponent he “could barely scratch” was something of a cause for alarm. Io Kuzami, however, had a different take on the matter and snorted in resentment.

“Hmph. At that level, if I were to make a serious effort...”

“Yeah, in the end it was Mizu— Io Kuzami-san’s magic that looked like it was really doing something.”

“Is that so?”

As Suimei inquired further, Io Kuzami abruptly grabbed her left hand as if to restrain it.

“That is so. Well, that demi-ogre caused my left arm to throb, so I should offer him my praise, but—”

Watching Io Kuzami’s chuuni-like actions, Reiji made a strange face.

“Um, Io Kuzami-san? At the time, wasn’t it your left eye that was throbbing?” he asked.

“Hmm? Is that how it was? Then in that case, to cause my left eye to throb—”

“If you forgot, it isn’t a free-for-all excuse to bring up your stupid evil eye!” Suimei shouted.

She went from grabbing her left arm to clutching at her left eye. No longer able to take it, Suimei couldn’t help retorting. He just couldn’t understand why she had to exaggerate every little thing before she was satisfied.

“The point is that the demon general was strong,” Reiji clarified.

“What are you saying? Do you mean to imply he could have bested me? That I’m weaker than he?”

“Listen, that’s...”

As Io Kuzami renewed a pointless argument with Reiji, Lefille took it upon herself to get things back on track.

“We’re getting nowhere like this, Reiji-kun. You said he was strong, but what does that mean? Can you give us some kind of perspective?”

“Um, let’s see...”

“Haven’t I been telling you? He was but a small fry roughly on the level of a dragonnewt—hardly a worthy opponent for my greatness.”

“...”

Io Kuzami took each and every opportunity to worm her way back into the conversation, and even Lefille was starting to get annoyed. Sensing that this was indeed a fruitless exercise, Suimei turned to Titania for an intervention. She partially closed her eyes as if remembering what happened, then began speaking.

“That demon general’s power is a considerable threat. He easily brushed aside our magic and manipulated a powerful red lightning that was not in itself magic. His physical abilities were also astounding. How should I put it...? Not even my speed was able to do much against him.”

“I see...”

Because Suimei had fought Titania before, he was quite familiar with her strength. And if she said the demon general in question was strong, Suimei knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was an opponent not to be underestimated.

“Was there anything else that stuck out about him?”

As Reiji and Titania pondered over Suimei’s question, Io Kuzami smiled.

“Why the silence? There is but one more matter worth mentioning. He called all of us offerings, did he not?”

“Ah!”

“Yeah, now that you mention it...”

Hearing what Io Kuzami said, the lightbulb seemed to come on for

the other two. Suimei made a grim expression.

“Offerings?”

“Indeed. That demi-ogre did not hesitate to treat humans as mere foodstuff. In fact, several defenders of the temple met such a fate at his hands.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re saying it wasn’t just a bluff? That he seriously eats people...?”

Suimei seemed to be at a loss, but Reiji and Titania both nodded to confirm just what he didn’t want to hear. People who held absolute confidence in their abilities usually tended to exaggerate their power before their inferiors. And that’s what Suimei had assumed was going on when Io Kuzami first said this demon general referred to humans as “offerings.” But to think that he was really a man-eating monster...

When Suimei looked into Reiji and Titania’s faces, he could see the horror in their eyes. They’d seen the evidence of the unholy feast—that much was clear. Seeming to realize something, Felmenia questioned them with a grim expression.

“It couldn’t be... Is the reason Gregory-dono and the others are not here because...”

The same thought had crossed Suimei’s mind. It was unusual for the knights who were always with Titania not to be by her side. As Suimei and the others grew tense waiting for the answer, Titania shook her head.

“White Flame-dono, there is no need to worry. Gregory and the others were injured and remained in the self-governed state, but they will all be fine.”

“Thank goodness...”

“Well, at least there’s some good news.”

Felmenia let out a sigh of relief and Suimei nodded in approval. In Felmenia’s case, she was concerned about the safety of her countrymen. Suimei had only met Gregory and the others in passing, but they took care of Reiji and Mizuki. If something happened to them, it wouldn’t sit well with him. But after such worries were dispelled, Lefille let out something of a baffled groan.

“I understand that whoever attacked all of you was a monster that ate people, but that behavior isn’t typical of demons...”

“Yes, I also find that part mysterious. I have never even heard of it.”

Felmenia seconded Lefille’s point—and it was a good one. Even though the demons were unequivocally evil, inhuman beings, Suimei had also never heard of them eating people before.

“I do not understand it myself, but the opponent we fought was indeed a man-eating monster.”

In the end, Titania was unable to enlighten them any. They just

didn't have access to the right information. All they knew was that a menacing demon general had appeared. As the grim conversation was about to come to an end, the one who brought up the man-eating aspect in the first place—Io Kuzami—spoke up.

"My eternal rival, do you not have any ideas?"

"Why're you asking me? Don't just throw this at me."

"Well? I just thought I'd entertain any of your delusions that might fit the bill."

Suimei couldn't tell what Io Kuzami was thinking as she peered at him with an extremely interested gaze. But while he was trying to figure it out, Reiji leaned forward and echoed the sentiment.

"Suimei, I'd also like to hear what you think."

"Hey, you too now...?"

Seeing that Reiji was jumping on the bandwagon, Suimei grumbled. Just why did they have such absolute faith in Suimei's opinion in situations like this? In truth, there was a lot of insight he had to offer as a magician, but if he said too much here, his identity would be exposed. That fear suppressed him to silence.

But upon seeing that all eyes in the room were fixed on him, he realized that he had nowhere to run. As Suimei drew in a deep breath and resigned himself, he looked right at Io Kuzami. It wasn't a glare, but the sharp gaze of a magician.

"What is it?"

"...Earlier you called that demon general a demi-ogre, right? What did you mean by that?"

"Exactly as it sounds. If I were to say it in the language of you lot, that being was a demi-ogre."

Not quite grasping who she was alluding to by "you lot," Suimei questioned Felmenia without shifting his gaze.

"Menia, what's a demi-ogre?"

"I... I also do not really know."

Felmenia didn't know, so Suimei then asked Lefille. She just closed her eyes and shook her head. Glancing to Titania and Reiji next, they also looked puzzled. That could only mean one thing—that demi-ogres weren't really a thing of this world. And if that were the case, Suimei might have a clue or two as to what was going on.

"Everything I say from here on is pure conjecture on my part. I think that demon general is probably at the top of the food chain of this world."

"The top of the food chain?"

Suimei nodded in response to Reiji's question, but naturally, the three girls from this world didn't understand this talk of food chains.

"Suimei, what do you mean?"

"I meant exactly what I said. In the world we come from, mankind

stands at the top of the food chain. But here, I think a more powerful being occupies that spot.”

In Suimei’s world—as far as normal people like Reiji knew—it was common knowledge that humans were the ultimate apex predator. It was ultimately up to them to decide what other creatures lived and died. Of course, this was ignoring the fact that even they were common prey for the strongest biological being on the planet—bacteria. But Suimei knew bringing that up would only needlessly complicate things, so he readily left it out.

And as far as society was concerned, the creatures they didn’t know about and didn’t cross swords with were nonexistent. There was no need to bring those up in front of Reiji and Mizuki, either. Normal humans were better off not knowing that there were monsters lurking in the darkness waiting to knock humanity down a peg. Nevertheless...

Even after Suimei brought up the food chain, Reiji still didn’t quite catch his meaning.

“Even if you tell me that humans eat other animals...”

“That’s not explicitly the point. Try thinking of the beings on top as those who aren’t threatened at all by the existence of other animals. In this world, there are therianthropes, dwarves, elves, dragonnewts, and all manner of other species. It’s less a question of if there’s something that eats humans and more a question of if humanity has any natural enemies other than demons.”

In other words, was there something that preyed upon humans? In Suimei’s world, the answer would be something akin to ogres and vampires. But in this world... Titania in particular looked like she was deeply pondering the answer.

“Certainly, that may be the case... The demon general we faced did say something about lending Demon Lord Nakshatra his power. In other words, that he was not a demon.”

“So that’s to say he’s not a subordinate or servant. In that case, he’s probably something like a third party that endorses the Evil God’s plans... Though when I say it out loud, it sounds pretty strange.”

That was the part that left Suimei uneasy. He had already deduced that the conflict between the demons and the other beings of this world was a war by proxy between the Goddess and the Evil God.

To make an analogy with the human body, the demons would be something like a virus invading from outside. In response, the body would rally antibodies to defend itself from within. But what if a portion of those antibodies revolted and started working with the virus? If that was what was going on, they were going about everything the wrong way. As Suimei groaned at that grim possibility, Io Kuzami raised a rather interested voice.

“Hmph. That is quite an amusing idea.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

After glossing over her words with a noncommittal thanks, Suimei glanced at Reiji, who was nodding his head repeatedly in admiration.

“Uh, Reiji?”

“Ah, yeah. I was just thinking it’s probably as you said. Despite calling it conjecture, I think you’ve pretty much hit the nail on the head... Though I have to ask. Where did you get that idea?”

There it was. Suimei had predicted he’d get a question like that, and answered Reiji without a hint of defensiveness.

“From something I read back in Astel’s royal castle. I kinda put the rest together.”

“There’s more to it, right?”

Hearing those words, Suimei could feel his heart skip a beat. Reiji looked at him skeptically.

“As I thought, Suimei, you’ve got a little bit of *that* going for you.”

Reiji looked between Io Kuzami and Suimei several times, leading Suimei to realize what he meant. His secret was safe, but he couldn’t accept Reiji thinking *that* way about him. Standing up from his chair, he raised his voice in protest.

“Hey, stop that! Don’t lump me together with her!”

“But you know...”

Even as Suimei yelled, Reiji made a somewhat sour face as he talked. He looked exhausted, but there was no mistaking that Suimei was being teased. And then, for better or worse, Io Kuzami joined in.

“Fuahaha... Oh, my eternal rival, this simply means that you cannot rebel against the damned blood flowing through thy body. It is about time you resign your bastard self and accept thy place at my side.”

“No way! I’m not gonna call myself ‘Dark Crimson Hider,’ you hear me?! I’d rather die!”

“My goodness, to think that you would still be so shy. Hmph, you have a long way to go yet.”

“What the hell are you talking about?! Hey, Reiji, do something! This is all because of what you said!”

“Lalala, I can’t hear yooouuuuu!”

Reiji turned around and put his fingers in his ears, blatantly ignoring the yelling Suimei. As their friendly (?) little exchange continued, Lefille looked up at Suimei and whispered to him privately.

“Suimei-kun, this demon general... Do you think he’s as strong as they say?”

“In all likelihood, yes. Man-eaters are just what you’d think—natural enemies of man. Moreover...”

“Moreover?”

“Back when I talked about Eanru, Hatsumi’s half-elf companion

and Rumeiya-san mentioned something about a ‘Man-Eating Evil,’ remember?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. It was supposedly terrifyingly strong or something... Hmm?”

In the middle of remembering what they’d talked about at the fortress, Lefille inclined her head to the side in a charming way.

“What’s wrong?”

“I seem to recall a dragonnewt being the one to defeat the Man-Eating Evil. It’s just a possibility, but...”

Hearing those words, the color ran from Suimei’s face. It was his natural response to hearing about anything that involved the dragonnewt Eanru. If what he had defeated was the demon general Reiji and the others were talking about, or one of his kin, then just how powerful was he really?

“Ugh, my head hurts... What the hell? That dragon asshole is *that* strong? I don’t want to ever fight him again.”

“What are you saying? Didn’t you promise him a rematch?”

“I didn’t promise anything. That was all on him, so as far as I’m concerned, no.”

Suimei was retreating from reality like a spoiled child. But, upon realizing that most everyone had deteriorated into talking among themselves, Titania tried to get things back on track.

“Suimei, is it about time that we move on to the next topic?”

“Y-Yeah, let’s do that... What’s next on the docket?”

“Um, next is...”

Suimei was more than happy to change the subject, but Titania averted her gaze when he inquired about the new topic like it was something hard for her to talk about. That alone told him what it was. Perhaps it went without saying, since it was the elephant in the room. Like they’d rehearsed it, everyone turned towards Io Kuzami at the same time and let out one collective sigh. Upon witnessing this, Io Kuzami smirked.

“Hmph, to have you all sigh over me so... This beauty of mine... It is terrifying, if I do say so myself.”

Hearing Io Kuzami’s completely off-base interpretation, everyone hung their heads. Just how out of touch was she? Putting that aside, Suimei charged into the real topic at hand.

“So, what gives?”

“Back when we were fighting Demon General Ilzarl,” Reiji replied. “I don’t know... This just suddenly happened.”

“Suddenly? With no warning or trigger?”

“It was in the middle of the fight, so I couldn’t really say.”

“Hmm...”

Suimei fell deep into thought with a severe expression on his face.

But nothing jumped out at him. He then turned to Io Kuzami, as if to ask for an explanation. He prodded her with his discerning gaze, but all she did was smirk. Chances were that she knew, she just wasn't saying. Since she'd demanded that Suimei keep their prior exchange a secret, she likely had no intention of talking about it here. Reiji then folded his arms together as he groaned.

"As I thought... This means it's a split personality, right?"

"I gotta wonder."

"And that's completely out of our realm of expertise..."

Each sigh Reiji let out was heavier than the last. The way to cure Mizuki—to get her back to normal—was completely out of reach. Knowing that only made him more anxious. And because Suimei couldn't tell him the truth, his only option was to play dumb.

"Suimei-dono, it sounds like you and Reiji-dono are familiar with Mizuki-dono's Io Kuzami-dono, but just what is she?"

It was a question filled to the brim with proper honorifics. Felmenia seemed to have trouble following what she was saying herself as she asked it, but following up after her, Lefille leaned forward in curiosity on her tip toes.

"I'm also curious. It seems the two of you know something we don't."

"That's... something I don't really want to talk about. I'd be digging in Mizuki's wounds and heaping the salt on."

Hearing Suimei's metaphor, Felmenia grimaced.

"That is quite an extreme way of putting it, isn't it...?"

"The whole thing is extreme. The image of Mizuki burying her face in her pillow and kicking around violently comes to mind."

Hearing Suimei say that, Reiji closed his eyes and nodded. It seemed he too could visualize the same thing. If Suimei didn't tell them exactly what Io Kuzami was, the others would never understand. But the explanation wasn't exactly simple.

Io Kuzami—the name the thing possessing Mizuki was using—was taken from the persona Mizuki had created in middle school. You see, back then, she was dealing with a very severe case of the illness known as chuunibyou, which was quite common in kids that age. At every given opportunity, she would say meaningful things in meaningless ways, use antiquated speech, dress in a flashy fashion, and all manner of other things. In general, she spoke and behaved oddly.

And part of that was developing the persona she referred to as Io Kuzami. As her friends, it was something that had left Reiji and Suimei stumped. It seemed that the thing that had possessed her currently—in order to avoid Reiji and the others detecting the possession—had faithfully reproduced said persona.

Right now, Suimei was unable to discern why this spirit had possessed Mizuki. He groaned as he recalled the last time he'd had to deal with Io Kuzami. The present Io Kuzami, however, was demanding gratitude.

"You have been saying whatever you please for some time now, but I have not heard a single word of thanks for my great efforts in saving you all."

"That's... certainly true... but..."

Reiji grimaced. Thanking her earnestly wouldn't be easy.

"Did that really happen?" Suimei asked.

"Mm. Io Kuzami-san mentioned earlier how that demon general wasn't anything special to her, right? The moment after Mizuki turned into Io Kuzami-san, she used a spell of mixed attributes against the demon general."

After Reiji's explanation, Titania followed up in apparent astonishment.

"It was quite the surprise. To think such spells even exist..."

"Indeed. That magic of mine was quite powerful, was it not?"

"Sure was..."

Hearing Reiji give his frank impression, Io Kuzami looked completely satisfied. Outwardly, she looked high on admiration and praise, but Suimei knew whatever was going on inside had to be more complicated than that. While he was attempting to scrutinize the inner workings of her head, Reiji turned to Felmenia curiously.

"Reiji-dono, is something the matter?" she asked.

"No, I was just thinking that you didn't seem very surprised, Sensei."

"Oh?"

"I mean, come on... You heard me say she used a mixed attribute spell, right?"

Reiji continued to look at her with a curious expression, which Felmenia reciprocated. Basically, Reiji was wondering why she'd had no reaction to hearing about the extraordinary magic Io Kuzami used. In this world, the mixing of attributes would be tantamount to a huge technological breakthrough. But to Felmenia, who had been receiving lessons from Suimei, this was essentially old news. Upon realizing the disconnect, however, Felmenia cleared her throat and began replying.

"Ahem... The magic that you and Her Royal Highness witnessed is certainly rare, but if you think about it carefully, then it is not all that large of a leap."

"Meaning?"

"Just now, you said that it was a mixture of attributes, but would it not be more appropriate to say that it was a spell that borrowed properties from both attributes?"

Hearing Felmenia's reply, Reiji cocked his head to the side. To him, it sounded like she'd just said the same thing twice. And indeed they were similar, but there was a critical difference.

"The mixing of attributes... In short, you could say that it is the creation of a new concept. For example, if you mix the fire and earth attributes, what is the attribute that would be brought about in the end? That is, of course, knowledge that we have no way of acquiring. But if what you said about her spell is true, it would mean that Io Kuzami-dono gave birth to a completely new attribute... Would you mind relaying to me the chant that Io Kuzami-dono used?"

"Um, if I remember right, it went: 'Oh Fire and Earth...' Oh, I see..."

"As I thought, they are separate, right?"

Felmenia nodded as Reiji came to an understanding.

"Right from the outset of the chant, it declares the use of two attributes. In accordance with that, the spell will consult the power of two different Elements, so it is not a separate magic system that mixes them together. Looking at it from the Elements' point of view, there is no way to demonstrate the existence of an Element other than the eight attributes. So while I cannot declare that such a thing is impossible, it is extremely improbable."

Felmenia paused there for a moment before continuing her explanation.

"Magic can be summed up as the relationship between the Elements. In other words, it can be thought of as rival Elements opposing each other. However, there are also Elements that have a natural affinity and cooperative nature. That's important when using magic in this world. One must remember the basis of the relationship of the Elements being used."

When it came to using magicka, it could be said that there was no such thing as actually mixing two different completed magickas together. It was possible to take flames born of magicka and wind born of magicka—in other words, the phenomenon brought about by spells—and mix them together, but otherwise, such forces were dispositionally opposed to one another.

Magic in this world, however, was reliant on calling upon the power of the Elements. That made it possible to mix spells of the same attribute. It was hypothetically possible to do the same with different attributes, but there was a key problem with that. Without knowing which Element (in this case, the new Element created by the merger of two existing ones) to meditate on, any such mixed spell would never come to life.

As such, rather than saying two attributes were being mixed, it was more proper to say that a spell borrowed power from two

attributes. Hearing her explain it so, Reiji looked convinced.

“Well, when you put it like that, I guess so, huh? That’s Sensei for you.”

Perhaps realizing the admiration welling within him, Reiji spoke rather humbly. However, Felmenia shook her head at this.

“All I did was point out a minor flaw in your way of thinking. However...”

“It sounds incredibly useful, and... like we should be able to use it too.”

It was there Reiji came to understand what Felmenia was trying to convey. He’d been hung up on a turn of phrase, but she’d unraveled the real meaning behind it in an easy to understand way. It was just a matter of changing your approach—the way you were thinking. That was one of the most essential components of Western occultism. By changing your point of view, it was possible to see things that were not visible before. This applied to any field, but for Western occultism that was primarily concerned with the physical and metaphysical, to thoroughly investigate the true nature of things and draw ever nearer to the truth was an indispensable part of the practice.

“So, Sensei, can you use it?” Reiji asked.

“No, I’m... Certainly, if I wanted to try it, then it would not be impossible, but...”

Right now, Felmenia was likely capable of performing the magic they were talking about. Really, as she was now, she could probably do so with ease. But even then, using *magicka* was far more powerful and efficient since it wasn’t bound to attributes and Elements in the first place.

But she wanted to avoid explaining that she was able to use much stronger spells than that, leaving her at a bit of a loss as to how to respond to Reiji. She was mumbling and stalling with a sullen expression, but Io Kuzami seemed to pick up on her internal debate.

“That magic of mine is powerful, you know? If you are so inclined, would you like to try and see?”

“No, it’s not that I doubt the power of the spell...”

Despite the small bit of provocation, Felmenia showed no signs of taking the bait. She was still at a loss. Suimei replied for her.

“Quit it. For now.”

“What? How boring.”

Io Kuzami gave a dissatisfied reply to Suimei’s aggravated words, but quietly backed down for the moment. If her self-confidence was to be believed, her magic was indeed quite powerful. If the thing that had possessed Mizuki was a spirit connected to this world like Suimei suspected, its connection to the Elements would be on a level that surpassed any human. That alone would strengthen its magic

significantly. So even if Felmenia used the same type of spell, it wouldn't compare to Io Kuzami's.

As Io Kuzami was still pouting, Liliana entered the living room. After peeping from the door, she wandered over towards Suimei and the others. Watching her adorable behavior, the women in the room were all smiling broadly. But rather than take a seat with everyone, for some reason Liliana headed towards Io Kuzami.

"Have you finished frolicking with the cats? Hmm?"

Io Kuzami sounded like she was being playful with a child, but Liliana did not respond to her. She simply turned to Suimei with a sour look on her face.

"Is Mizuki... still ridiculous?"

"As you can see for yourself."

"Calling me ridiculous is quite impertinent of you. I am perfectly normal, you know?"

Io Kuzami frowned at being so ignored, while Liliana continued making a sour face.

"I should think not. I feel like... something bad... has possessed you."

"Uncooperative" would be more accurate than "bad," but that was a minor contention. Unlike Reiji and Titania, Liliana could sense something about Io Kuzami. The girl touched by the malicious power of darkness likely sensed something threatening. That's what Suimei suspected.

Io Kuzami grimaced as Liliana leaned in and scrutinized her face. And then...

"Now... Take this."

"Bwuh?!"

As if she was looking forward to it, Liliana pulled on both of Io Kuzami's cheeks. Seeing this, everyone went wide-eyed. Suimei had no idea what she was up to. No, with Io Kuzami's cheeks in her hands, it was quite obvious what she was up to. Liliana was pushing and pulling on Io Kuzami's face like it was clay in her hands.

"Ugh! Wh...at in all the h...ells are you do...ing?!"

"Bring back Mizuki. No, leave Mizuki... and never come back."

"Hey! Lily!"

Liliana squished and reshaped Io Kuzami's face as she tried to physically drive her out. Unable to let this continue, Lefille cut between them in a fluster. Back when Liliana was depressed, Mizuki had done a lot to cheer her up and care for her. That was likely why she was trying to do what she could for her now. She felt like she owed her that much.

Eventually, Lefille managed to pry Liliana away from Io Kuzami. But that didn't seem to deter her. She thrust a finger out at Io Kuzami

with a snap. It looked like she was planning on using her Astral Shooter to give her a good shock. Seeing this, Suimei stepped in.

“Liliana, stop that.”

“Why? If something... has possessed Mizuki... won’t this drive it out?”

“No, it’s probably useless. Give it up.”

“Fine... I understand.”

Hearing his words, Liliana lowered her arm despondently. Meanwhile, Reiji and Titania simply looked like they had no idea what was going on.

Astral Shooter was the technique Suimei had taught Liliana to extend her own astral body to attack an opponent’s. It manifested a physical effect by making use of the connection between the physical and astral body. The astral body referred to the shell that enveloped a being spiritually. To put it roughly, it was the glue that bound together the things known as the soul and the consciousness. And since consciousness was part of the astral body, astral attacks weren’t as effective against targets who’d fainted or were asleep.

And presently, Mizuki wasn’t conscious either, meaning she was in a state in which an astral attack wouldn’t reach her. But the astral body of the thing possessing Mizuki *was* connected to her body right now, so it should still affect Io Kuzami. Liliana’s aim was likely to use her Astral Shooter to take decisive action against it and, if circumstances permitted, pull it out and urge Mizuki’s mind to reawaken. Little did she know it was effectively impossible to wake someone from an out of body experience. However, because the proprietor of the outer layer of the consciousness was not the soul, the astral body and physical body were not so firmly connected that it would be impossible to remove something that had become attached in the wrong place.

Such a high-handed method would be befitting of exorcism, which was likely the approach Liliana had taken. But even if she did it and succeeded, it would only purge rather than erase the thing possessing Mizuki. And without anything to defend Mizuki, it could simply just possess her all over again. If Suimei at least knew its real name, he would be able to bind it and obstruct any attempts at repossession, but...

Despite having just been pinched mercilessly by Liliana, Io Kuzami for some reason had a content look on her face.

“Oh patched eye girl, you have quite the violent and dangerous side to you, don’t you? Indeed, those garments are also to my liking. I shall make you my disciple.”

“I decline.”

“Of course. Now that you have become my disciple, you require

your own darkness codename... We shall start with a temporary one. You are the black emissary who hides the evil eye of the dragon king, so 'Dragon Eyes Black Lolita' shall do."

"Is this a card game now...?"

"It really is like a card game name..."

"She's not... listening to me..."

As if she hadn't heard Liliana's refusal at all, Io Kuzami was steadily moving forward with the preparations (?) to make Liliana her disciple. Those observing her vainglorious behavior were split between exasperation and exhaustion. Granted, that had largely been the reaction to Io Kuzami from the start.

However, the chaos in the Yakagi residence was far from over. Right after one disturbance quieted down, another came rioting to the forefront.

"...Hmm?"

Suimei noticed the abrupt irregularity and frowned dubiously.

"Suimei-dono, is something the matter?"

"We have a guest. On top of that... Hey, they're just entering the house as they please!"

The Yakagi residence in the Empire was the same as the Yakagi residence in Japan in that it was protected by a barrier of sensory and monitoring magicka. Because of that, whenever there were intruders or visitors, that information was relayed directly to Suimei's mind.

"Who is it, Suimei-dono?"

"Wai— It's that dangerous woman!"

"Wh-What?!"

Hearing Suimei's ominous words, Lefille was the one who yelled out loudly. She seemed to have guessed who it was on that description alone. After all, there was only one person Suimei talked about that way. As Lefille began panicking, Liliana observed her with a knitted brow.

"What's wrong... Lefille?"

"This is the worst possible situation! I-Is there somewhere I can hide?!"

"You need... a hiding place? If so... then they're all over. Like there... for example."

Liliana glanced over to a desk set up in the corner of the living room with a quilt over it. Certainly, considering her current stature, Lefille would be able to hide herself under it. It would be rather cramped and unpleasant, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Resigning herself, the panicking Lefille transformed into a red gale and leaped into hiding. In the blink of an eye, she was stowed under the desk, but her long, red ponytail was still sticking out. It was a somewhat comical case of hiding one's head, but leaving their ass

exposed. Indeed, she was perfectly given away as she was, but nobody could bring themselves to tell her.

“Suimei, when you said ‘that dangerous woman,’ did you mean Her Imperial Highness Graziella?” asked Titania, her expression betraying her clenched jaw.

“Yeah. Come to think of it, you hate her too, don’t you? Should I turn her away?”

“Kick her out! Make her leave!” shouted the desk from the corner.

Ignoring the unasked-for commotion, Suimei looked at Titania with a troubled expression.

“No, it’s fine. I am personally rather reluctant, but please do as you see fit.”

In other words, Titania was alright with letting her in. If she’d come here, after all, it was likely on some sort of business. But even knowing that, Titania couldn’t help the grand sigh that escaped her lips. They still didn’t get along.

Suimei then looked at Reiji, who also nodded. He had no objection. And before long, the door to the living room opened. The one to appear in the doorway, as everyone expected, was Imperial Princess Graziella Filas Rieseld.

Without a single escort, she’d come on her own. Perhaps that was because of her unshakable conceit, but even though it was inside the imperial capital, the Yakagi residence should have been hostile territory for her. Nevertheless, she didn’t seem to be on guard in the least. In fact, the first thing that came out of her mouth was something that sounded an awful lot like an apology.

“Sorry I’m late. The reports had really piled up.”

Her announcement of tardiness made it sound like it had been her intention to come here all along. And sooner, no less. Everyone beheld her with a puzzled expression, but Graziella was looking over to the corner of the living room. At the ponytail sticking out from the desk, specifically. There was no need to ask the reason for her skeptical look.

“...By the way, what is that?”

Hearing Graziella’s question, Lefille’s ponytail jumped in fright. Lefille was unable to see anybody from her hiding spot, so she wasn’t yet certain she’d been found out... though the atmosphere in the room probably gave it away. Perhaps unable to bear the awkward silence any longer, she came out from under the desk.

“Hmph... So you spotted me.”

Lefille had more or less accepted her fate, but she was acting like nothing happened and trying to brush her embarrassing failure under the rug. She was trying to act cool, but it just wasn’t working with the way she looked. Meanwhile, when Graziella saw (the now tiny)

Lefille, her gaze grew even more scrutinizing.

“Who is that? She seems familiar.”

“What? Oh, um... I’m, um...”

It seemed she hadn’t been found out yet after all. Clinging to that hope, she made one last desperate attempt to deceive Graziella, but she was too slow on the draw. Reiji and Titania were far faster.

“It’s Lefille-san.”

“It is the Shrine Maiden of Spirits.”

“NOOOOOOOO! You can’t tell her!”

They had no ill intentions; they were simply telling the truth. But it was a death sentence to Lefille. After she shrieked, the room sank into silence.

“The Shrine Maiden of Spirits? This little girl?”

When Graziella asked for confirmation, Lefille nodded once. It was quite hard to believe that a person could shrink, but perhaps because Graziella was familiar with Lefille, she couldn’t laugh off the resemblance. Meanwhile, Lefille was suddenly gripped by a strange notion.

“H-Hmph! Wanna fight? If you do, then I’ll gladly accept your challenge! I can still use the power of the spirits in this form this time! So if you’re going to come at me, then come!”

Lefille began shadowboxing, throwing her tiny punches in Graziella’s direction. Her movements were impressively swift, but that only increased the strangeness of the situation. Graziella was left utterly befuddled. Eventually, after managing to take it all in, or perhaps just hitting her breaking point...

“Pfft! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA! What the hell is this?! Isn’t it just far too silly?! T-Tiny! You’re tiny, you know?! No matter how you look at it, this is foul play, Shrine Maiden-dono! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Graziella could scarcely contain her laughter. She was in stitches, nearly doubled over and holding her sides as she roared. As for the subject of her laughter, Lefille was mortified and on the verge of tears.

“Fuuuuuuuuck! Don’t laugh! I’m not like this because I want to be! So not one more laugh out of you! If you insist on continuing, then I won’t show any mercy!”

With tears in her eyes, Lefille was stomping her feet and flailing her arms. And in a most unusual turn for her, she even started cursing. In response to that, Graziella did her best to speak through her laughter.

“N-No, I will cease for now. I have a debt to repay you, but it would merely be considered bullying right now. And it’s not nice to bully the weak, now is it, Shrine Maiden-dono?”

Graziella turned a pointed gaze on Lefille as she spoke plainly of

her grudge. It sounded like she was criticizing something that had come up the last time they encountered one another. Lefille seemed to be at a loss for words, and after trembling in frustration for a while...



“UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

She let out a full-throttle wail of frustration and stormed away. As if chasing her from the area, Graziella’s laughter filled the room once more.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! I can’t—I just can’t! This is... f-far too silly...”

Her words contained not a hint of sarcasm. It seemed she found Lefille’s reaction to be honestly amusing. Plunking down into a chair, she continued to cackle. Having passed on interjecting in their exchange, Suimei’s thoughts turned pityingly on Lefille as he groaned.



When Lefille eventually returned after storming off, Graziella took to questioning her immediately.

“So, what happened? What’s become of you, Shrine Maiden-dono?”

She was being perfectly serious, but because she still couldn’t quite contain herself, an unmistakable grin rose on her lips. Lefille stuck her tongue out and pouted in an extremely childlike fashion.

“Nothing in particular!” she huffed, turning her head away indignantly.

“But look at you. Unless my eyes deceive me, you’re quite a bit smaller than when we last met.”

“Do you have some sort of complaint, Your Highness?”

“Hardly. In fact, I find it rather amusing. Why don’t we schedule appearances for you at the imperial cathedral like this? Demonstrating your skills as the Shrine Maiden of the Spirits in such a sweet form, I’m sure the faithful would come in droves to see you. Though most of them would probably be there to curry your favor. Pfft...!”

A peep of Graziella’s stifled laughter leaked out. She was likely imagining a tiny Lefille trying to rake in money at the cathedral.

“Absolutely not! I am not some exhibition!”

After Lefille refused her proposal, Graziella’s expression suddenly became serious.

“What are you saying? Gloss over it all you like, but influential figures and celebrities were meant to be put on display. They’re public figures, so why not let the public get a good look at them? There’s nothing more to it than that.”

“Grrr...”

Lefille couldn’t argue with her. She didn’t like the implications of treating someone like an exhibition, but Graziella had a rather sound point about the nature of public figures. Their presence was a positive thing. Even if they themselves didn’t enjoy it, that was simply the

price of fame.

“But my, you’re quite cute like this. I’d never have dreamed it, seeing your original form.”

“Shut up! I’m still cute even in my original form!”

Even though Graziella was speaking honestly without putting on airs, Lefille still stamped her foot in objection. Meanwhile, everyone beholding this was struck with a single thought: “*That’s* what she’s objecting to?”

“Suimei-kun! Don’t you also owe Her Highness a debt?! Repay it and defeat her right here! Reduce her to ashes! No, leave nothing behind!”

The great Shrine Maiden of Spirits suddenly took the conversation in a rather violent direction. She was urging Suimei to settle his dispute with Graziella in his own living room. As one would expect, he wasn’t exactly about to jump on that bandwagon.

“No, no way. No matter how you put it, that’s a little...”

“Are you not my ally?!”

“Lefi, sometimes you really say some absurd things, don’t you? Hey, you! This is your fault, you know? Do something.”

With that, Suimei turned to Graziella. She had a rather displeased look on her face, clearly unhappy that Suimei was speaking to her so heedless of her royal station.

“You’re as insolent as ever, bastard. I am the princess of this nation, you know. Do you not have the grace to watch the way you speak around your social superiors?”

“Do you really think I’d try and flatter someone who came here to pick a fight?”

“Fair enough. Now that I think about it, just trying to imagine you speaking politely is actually sending shivers down my spine.”

As Graziella flashed a provocative smile, a protruding vein became visible on Suimei’s forehead.

“What’d you just say?”

“Do it, Suimei-kun! Go for it!”

As Suimei grew agitated, Lefille took advantage of the opportunity and tried to stoke the fire. There was no way any conversation was going to proceed now. Io Kuzami was laughing heartily, but everyone else just looked troubled. Eventually, no longer able to stand it, Reiji stepped in on everyone’s behalf.

“Hey, Suimei, reel it in here.”

“I’m not really...”

“You too, Graziella-san. Okay?”

Reiji looked at Graziella with a smile. He was likely trying to calm her in his own way, but there was no way that alone would appease her. It would never work...

“Hmph... Very well. You’re right.”

But contrary to all expectations, Graziella backed off. And with no argument. Suimei had been certain this stalemate would last for quite some time, so this unforeseen turn of events left his jaw on the floor. Everyone else felt the same way.

“What? Every last one of you is making a strange face,” inquired Graziella.

“Nothing. You just backed off rather easily...”

“Is that bad?”

“Not per se, but...”

It was just hard to swallow. She had shown mercy to the tiny Lefille earlier, but at heart, Graziella was a sore loser. So for her to so simply back down against an opponent like Suimei with whom she had a standing feud, he was utterly staggered. The only thing he could figure was that it had been the intervention of the mediator, Reiji. And now that he thought about it, Graziella did look a little restless...

“What’s this? Did that jerk Reiji capture another one?”

“It appears so...” quietly replied Titania.

“Hmph. Looks like it,” scoffed Io Kuzami.

“Wait, wait, wait! Just when did that happen?” Suimei demanded in bewilderment.

In a way, this was perfectly expected. It was the norm, after all. But Suimei was still floored. This was unknown to Suimei’s group, but after what had happened at the temple in the self-governed state, Graziella’s opinion of Reiji had become quite favorable. Titania was aware of this, and mumbled to herself in dissatisfaction about how Reiji just had to go and save her...

“Anyway, I know it’s a little late to be asking this now, but why the hell are you here?”

“What? Were you not informed?”

“Come again...?”

Graziella sounded as if she expected him to know what was going on, but Suimei had no clue. He’d only let her in because Titania had given him the okay. Why she’d even showed up in the first place was beyond him. Meanwhile, Reiji seemed to know what was going on and was feigning innocent.

“Oh, did I not tell you?”

“Hell no, you didn’t. I haven’t heard anything about this, so if you’ve got an explanation, you better get to it already.”

“Suimei, Her Imperial Highness Graziella travelled with us to the self-governed state.”

“The hell?”

“It’s the fault of that annoying Goddess’s oracle,” said Graziella. “After you lot left the imperial capital, an oracle appeared before me

to deliver the message that I was to accompany Reiji. That's why I am here today as well."

Graziella went on to explain how she'd joined Reiji's party. Which was why, more or less, she'd invited herself here. Listening to her, Suimei folded his arms atop his desk and groaned.

"I get why you came, but isn't it an entirely separate thing for you to be hanging out with us like this?"

"The circumstances have changed. As long as I have my image to consider, I cannot insist on killing you. However reluctant I may be to relent."

"Well, I don't really care as long as you know how to cool your jets."

With that, Suimei then turned to his companions.

"Ah, I do not have any thoughts in particular on the matter," said Felmenia, shaking her head.

She bore no ill will for the princess. As long as her own princess had taken a stand on the matter, as her retainer, Felmenia was obliged to follow Titania's lead rather than expressing her own opinion. Lefille, however, looked quite unhappy. If nothing else, her earlier exchange with Graziella made her reluctant to accept her now. But after she'd been so earnest, Lefille couldn't outright object.

"Then, starting all over, I am Graziella Filas Rieseld. I don't expect you to treat me favorably, but do keep in mind that I am currently travelling with Reiji and the others."

After giving a short self-introduction, Graziella turned to Liliana.

"Liliana Zandyke, it has been a while."

"It is good... to see you again."

"If you ever wish to return to the Elite Twelve, I'd be happy to hear your case anytime."

"Thank you... but I no longer have any intention... of returning."

"...I see. So be it, then."

As Liliana shook her head emphatically to make her refusal quite clear, Graziella readily backed off without hounding her. Her attitude made Suimei think that she was just playing the politics of pleasantries, but he caught the briefest glimpse of what looked like disappointment in her expression. It told him that, somewhere deep down, she really had wanted Liliana to return. It was understandable, considering her talents. Both her absence and Rogue's must have been felt quite dearly by the Empire.

"So, how much of our tale has already been shared?" asked Graziella.

"Let's see... We talked about Demon General Ilzarl, and we just finished up talking about Mizuki," Reiji replied.

"I see. Then it seems I made it in time to talk about that."

“That’?”

Unsure what “that” was, Suimei cocked his head to the side.

“Suimei, she means the reason we went to the self-governed state.”

“Ah, that weapon or whatever some hero left behind, right?”

“Mm. This.”

It was there that Reiji pulled something out of his pocket. It was a silver accessory in the shape of a wing with a blue gem embedded at its center. It was something like a medal, but its construction was quite delicate. Seeing it, Lefille made a puzzled expression.

“Reiji-kun, what is that accessory?”

Her doubts were natural. Based on the flow of the conversation, everyone had expected him to present a weapon, not some piece of jewelry. Seeing it, Lefille wasn’t the only one who had her head cocked to the side.

“Lefille-san, this is the weapon that was said to have been left behind by the hero.”

“It is?”

“Reiji-dono... It only looks like a mundane ornament to my eyes, but are you suggesting it is endowed with some sort of mystical power?”

When Felmenia inquired about the true nature of the ornament, Reiji made a face like her question was a difficult one for him to answer.

“It certainly seems to be, but...”

While trying to explain things to Felmenia, Reiji looked down at the feathery ornament. He was surprised at what met his gaze, however—Suimei with a wrinkled brow was staring right back at him.

“Suimei?”

“This is a weapon, right? So why does it look like some regular old accessory?”

“Well, you see... It transforms. Into a sword.”

“No kidding...”

With a slight sigh, Suimei stroked his chin and scrutinized the object in Reiji’s hand as he peered at it from different angles. Reiji then made a grim expression as he began explaining again.

“When I first saw it, I also thought it was strange that it looks like an ordinary accessory. But this thing definitely transforms into a weapon. Though I don’t have any idea why it’s like this...”

It was then Reiji realized that all eyes in the room were on him rather than the ornament. They were expectant, waiting for him to demonstrate.

“Sorry, but I can’t turn it into a weapon.”

“What do you mean? If you know it turns into a weapon, that

means you managed to do it previously, no?" asked Felmenia.

"Yeah, I did, but it seems there's some sort of condition for the transformation. I was only able to do it that one time."

"White Flame-dono, the only time Reiji-sama was able to transform it into a weapon was in the heat of battle. The situation at the time was grim, but when Reiji-sama called out to it, it responded."

"When it transformed, I felt like I'd closed the gap between me and the demon general."

"Do you mean to say it made you stronger after it transformed into a weapon, Reiji-kun?"

Something about that didn't really resonate with Lefille, but the one to answer her doubts was someone who'd witnessed it herself—Graziella.

"Just from what we saw, that weapon most likely strengthens the wielder and grants them abilities. He was manipulating a special power in addition to his own. It's certainly fitting for a relic known as a hero's weapon."

Graziella nodded repeatedly as she spoke of the weapon without a hint of facetiousness. Seeing Reiji wielding it must have left a rather strong impression on her.

As for Suimei's group, who hadn't been there to see it in person, they were all only half convinced. It wasn't that they didn't believe their friends; it just didn't seem real. But such skepticism was only natural. After all, seeing is believing—and all they could see right now was the mostly unremarkable pin-like accessory in Reiji's hand. It just didn't add up with what they were hearing.

"Suimei-dono?" Felmenia suddenly asked, peering at Suimei.

"I see, this is..." Suimei replied a beat late in a suspect tone.

While everyone else was talking, he was simply staring at the relic. He seemed to be absorbed in thought rather than the conversation.

"You may not believe us," said Titania, "but everything we've said is the truth. After Reiji-sama turned it into a weapon, the demon general who'd driven me into a corner was easily overwhelmed..."

A somewhat entranced expression on her face as she recounted the fight, she seemed to be recalling Reiji's gallant figure in that moment. Suimei didn't want to know what delusions were passing through her head, so he didn't question her account. Reiji was also recollecting the encounter, however, and suddenly clapped his hands together when a certain thought crossed his mind.

"Now that I think of it, I've never seen you use a sword like that, Tia. I had no idea you were so strong."

"No, it was nothing..."

Titania naturally replied in a humble and ladylike manner, but...

“Ergh...”

What ended up coming out of her mouth was a befuddled gasp over her grave error. Suimei, who had been sworn to secrecy, was irrepressibly astonished to see her reveal herself so carelessly. As for the girl who’d let her secret slip, she was fidgeting anxiously and unable to form a proper sentence.

“Ah, no, that was, that was, that was...”

Reiji, on the other hand, raised a cheerful voice.

“Gosh, you should’ve just told me from the get-go that you were so skilled with a blade. I’m practically an amateur. I would’ve loved to learn a thing or two from you.”

Reiji was in no way criticizing her, but the way Titania fell completely speechless indicated she’d taken it that way. She had it in her head that “strong with a sword” meant “tomboy” meant “not good.” So having her secret exposed would be a serious affair indeed. Glancing at Titania, who was fidgeting endlessly, Graziella flashed a curious expression.

“You were unaware that Her Royal Highness Titania was talented with a blade?”

“What? You already knew, Graziella-san?”

“But of course. Her Royal Highness is—”

“AAAAAAAH! No! You can’t, you mustn’t, you shan’t! I cannot have you say that, Your Imperial Highness!”

Just as Graziella was about to reveal Titania’s secret identity, Titania exploded in a fit of energetic shouting. Graziella beheld her with a cold gaze.

“I have no idea what reason you’d have to hide it, but after fighting in front of him, isn’t it far too late for that?”

“B-But...”

Having this pointed out to her, Titania faltered. She was still opposed to it because she didn’t want Reiji to dislike her. It was pitiful in its own way, but everyone in the room was watching her with expectant eyes, waiting for an answer. Seeing her so flustered and cornered was difficult for her retainer, and so Felmenia began explaining in her stead.

“Reiji-dono, Her Royal Highness is one of the Seven Swords. The fourth, to be specific, who goes by the title Twilight Beheading Princess. Even here in the north, she is regarded as the pinnacle of swordsmanship.”

You could practically hear the color drain from Titania’s face. At long last, she’d been found out. She looked as though she’d been plunged into the depths of despair, but Reiji’s reaction wasn’t she’d expected.

“Wow, really? Tia, that’s amazing!”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay, Tia?”

Titania looked so completely thrown off guard that Reiji was worried something was wrong. Finally becoming cognizant of a disparity between their expectations, both of them were blinking at each other in surprise.

“U-Um, R-Reiji-sama, do you not think me a tomboy now?”

“Why would I?”

“W-Well, to go after an opponent with a sword is extremely unladylike... How should I say it? It seems boorish for a woman.”

“Not at all. Especially since you’re so genteel and modest, Tia. I respect you for that.”

“T-Truly?!”

“Mm.”

Reiji gave a quick nod, and Titania’s face instantly brightened. Meanwhile, the corners of Graziella’s lips curved upward in a twisted grin.

“Your Royal Highness is far too naive. A man who would throw himself in harm’s way to protect others from evil would never look at a woman as an ornament for his own selfish conquest. Besides, if using a sword makes a woman a violent tomboy, then Shrine Maiden-dono here would be the absolute incarnation of boorishness, wouldn’t she?”

“Don’t throw me in as a punchline each and every time!”

When Graziella tossed a provoking glance Lefille’s way, she threw her hands up in the air and shouted in protest. Graziella had her by the nose.

“I told you Reiji wouldn’t care about that kinda crap,” Suimei said with a mild shrug as he turned to Titania.

“Huh? You knew too, Suimei?” asked Reiji.

“Hmm? Ah, well, yeah. After she nearly beat me to death, she told me to keep my lips sealed.”

“What? You fought Tia?”

Reiji turned a critical and somewhat suspicious gaze on his friend, but it was the panicking Titania who replied.

“I-It was nothing! That was, um... Suimei and I experienced a conflict of opinion... Or rather, there was a misunderstanding... There were various, um, various...”

Titania had been the one to ask for the duel. She’d even raised her sword against Suimei without a good and proper reason to do so. It was understandable that she didn’t want Reiji to know that. But it seemed Reiji was under his own Reiji-esque misapprehension...

“Aaah, you made Tia mad, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Wait, what?! How am I suddenly the bad guy here?!”

“I mean, that’s what happened with Sensei after we came to this world. Didn’t you do something again?”

As Reiji looked at him skeptically, Suimei attempted to defend himself.

“You really think I pissed off Tia?! That never happened!”

“I can’t think of anything else... Go figure. You must have done something without realizing it. How about apologizing for it now and making nice?”

“That was resolved a long time ago! And *I* was the one on the receiving end there... Hey, Tia, this is your fault! You know that, right? Tia?”

“Heeheehee, not even a strong woman is too much for Reiji-sama... Now that I know that, there is nothing to be frightened of. Be it a demon or a rival in love, all I have to do is cut them down and finish them off...”

Titania was muttering to herself in a low, sharp voice with a dark grin on her face. It was like she’d undergone a revelation—just an extreme and violent one. Suimei felt like he could see the dangerous aura building around her. Reiji simply watched her with a stiff smile.

“I don’t know what’s up with her, but she looks... super motivated, right?” said Suimei. “So can’t we let bygones be bygones?”

“...Probably.”

Suimei let out a big sigh and then urged a change of topic. Honestly speaking, he didn’t really care what it was at this point. His patience was tried. But in the midst of such discussion, an unexpected noise came from the ajar door to the living room. As everyone shifted their attention to the diminutive pitter-patter, they saw a lone cat walking in.

“Meow.”

It was like it was announcing itself. Did it want something? It didn’t appear to be urgent, but the resident cat expert—Liliana—was quick to translate.

“It has a request... for Hero Reiji.”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes. The cats seem to be hungry... and would like... to be fed now.”

“So that why it’s here? Okay, sure. If that’s all, then I don’t really mind, but...”

He couldn’t help wondering why it had to be him, but since he had no real reason to refuse, he nodded and agreed. His softhearted nature was getting the better of him, but even so, he was still a bit taken aback by the request.

“Reiji-dono, I will take care of feeding the cats. Lily, is that alright?”

“No, they want it to be Reiji... without fail. The cats... seem to be interested in him.”

“In me?”

“It’s likely related... to the divine protection you received... from the hero summoning. The cats are likely responding... to your sacred power.”

Hearing Liliana’s theory, Reiji turned to the cat.

“Really? You want it to be me?”

“Meow!”

Such an adorable answer caused Reiji to break out into a smile as he received the food from Liliana and headed outside. Short of hating them, there was no such thing as a person who didn’t delight in the affection of cats. Even Reiji looked quite happy as he was tending to them. Not long after he left the room, Liliana frowned.

“Was that... too heavy-handed?”

Graziella seemed to pick up on her meaning and raised a question.

“As I thought, it was your intention to separate Reiji from us, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. If Reiji is here... then there are things... that will be difficult to talk about. I was planning to have... Mizuki go with him, but...”

At that, Liliana tossed a sidelong glance to Kuzami’s way. The glint in her narrowed eye betrayed a hint of distrust. However, to Kuzami acted like this didn’t concern her at all.

“There is no need to worry about me. Indeed, you may just think of me as a divine sculpture whose beauty compels constant worship.”

Ignoring everything else, her simile was a little out there. If it were true, she would just be a nuisance to have around. But despite having managed to make this about her beauty, it really just meant she intended to stay and listen. As Liliana looked to Suimei to confirm if this was alright, he nodded to her.

“So, Lily, was that cat something you prepared?” Felmenia asked.

“Yes. I got the cats... to cooperate with me. I should have told you... beforehand, shouldn’t I?”

That was apparently what she’d been doing when everyone first gathered and she was off playing with the cats. As one would expect, she was still extremely cautious by nature.

“Now... may I begin?”

It seemed she’d gone to such lengths because she had something she wanted to discuss. As everyone’s attention fell on her, Liliana began speaking in her usual uneven manner.

“This concerns the weapon... we were just talking about.”

“Liliana, regarding that, did we not come to the conclusion it is simply something we do not know enough about?”

They’d already discussed the relic. But when Titania pointed that

out, Liliana shook her head and looked at Suimei.

“Suimei, back when we were talking... about the weapon... your responses were quite vague.”

“Hmm? That so?”

“Yes. Suimei... do you know... about that weapon?”

“What makes you think that?”

“When we were discussing it... you seemed to be elsewhere. Also, when you see something you don’t understand... you make a very serious, inquisitive face. There was... practically none of that.”

That was how she’d arrived at the conclusion that he knew something. Confronted with the evidence, Suimei put up both of his hands like he was surrendering.

“That’s Liliana for you. Very perceptive.”

“Though she is no longer, Liliana was still one of the Empire’s Elite Twelve. Such skills are to be expected.”

“It’s a little different from what I’ve heard, but isn’t that the Sacrament?”

When Suimei said that, Titania and Graziella’s expressions both froze. They had yet to mention the name of the weapon, so they were surprised to hear it come up. But they weren’t the only ones with questions.

“Then you do know something about it, Suimei-dono?” asked Felmenia.

“Well, more or less... But that’s it. The Sacrament is a weapon from my world. Magical heavy ordinance, to be specific.”

In an unusual turn for Suimei, he prefaced his explanation with a lack of confidence. Surprised by what he revealed, however, Graziella responded first.

“So as we thought, it originates from your world.”

“As you thought?”

“I am sure you already knew that the weapon is a relic left behind by a hero of old. But the name of another relic that was left behind with it uses a language from your world, leading us to believe that was where they’d come from.”

“You don’t say...”

Suimei wore a slightly curious expression, but Graziella continued.

“So, what is it?”

“There’s only but so much I can tell you. To put it simply, it uses mysteries that are different from magicka, and it’s an amazing weapon. Upon becoming its wielder, even a powerless nobody would be granted extraordinary power... Or so I’ve heard. But from the sounds of it, you guys got a glimpse of that already.”

“Suimei-kun, I’m sorry to interrupt, but when you say

‘extraordinary,’ is that extraordinary by your standards?”

“Hmm... Well, yeah. That’s how powerful it is. After all, the demon general that Tia and the imperial princess couldn’t lay a hand on was overwhelmed by the inexperienced Reiji with it, right?”

“I see. Reiji-kun already has the divine blessing of the hero summoning. If he made another great leap beyond that, I can certainly understand what you’re saying.”

After getting to know Suimei, Lefille had learned he had a bad habit of undervaluing himself. Moreover, he tended to speak of things relative to himself, which sometimes made for a skewed impression.

“But Suimei, what is it exactly that makes the weapon so strong? No matter how you put it, its power seems to be most unusual.”

“The Sacrament’s— No, it’s likely the outrageous part of the Lapis Judaicus set in it.”

“Lapis Judaicus?”

“You mean the gem?”

Suimei nodded and began explaining in typical fashion.

“There exists something called the Sage’s or Philosopher’s Stone. It’s an omnipotent catalyst that can turn lead or any other base metal into gold. Sometimes it’s just referred to as Lapis. In our world, creating Lapis is one of the goals of alchemy.”

“Did you say...”

“Gold?!”

“Th-Then, Suimei-dono, do you mean to say such a stone is set in the Sacrament?! And by using it, one can create as much gold as they like?!”

Upon hearing his conjecture, the color of Titania and Graziella’s eyes changed. Felmenia, as a mage, was naturally interested in learning what she could about such a confounding mystery, but the two royals of the group were likely processing the potential risks and rewards of being able to generate gold from mere junk. However, Suimei shook his head as he continued.

“No, this is different from the Lapis created by alchemy.”

“How so?”

“Well, hear me out. According to mysticology, there are three varieties of stone given the name Lapis. They’re all related in a sense, and each of them is able to act as a catalyst to take a small amount of work and give birth to something far greater, hence why they’re each considered a kind of Lapis. The most valuable asset of alchemy, the Philosopher’s Stone, is called Lapis Philosophorum. The Holy Grail filled with a blue liquid that is said to be able to resurrect the dead and grant immortality to the living is called Lapis Lapsus ex Illis Stellis, or Lapis Exillis for short. And the third is what you saw.”

“Lapis Judaicus...”

“That’s right. The ancient story goes that an apostle grew arrogant and provoked the wrath of God, and was thus cast down to earth from the heavens. An emerald that repelled evil fell out of the crown the apostle was wearing at the time, which faded and turned blue. That’s said to be the origin of the Lapis Judaicus.”

“In other words, it’s something created by a god of Suimei’s world...”

“Not even close. That’s just a story. It’s not like it’s really something created by some grand god. I don’t know who first created it or where, but they are certainly outrageously powerful... Actually, there isn’t anyone left who knows how to make Lapis, so I can’t deny that the original might seriously have been created by a god.”

After initially denying what Titania had suggested, he had to backtrack and admit that she might not be wrong. And it was then that Io Kuzami, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly spoke up.

“My eternal rival, this isn’t like you. You’ve been giving nothing but half-cooked answers for some time now, have you not? Not a single conclusive thing has left your mouth.”

“I’m an outsider when it comes to this stuff. Whether it’s the stone’s origin or purpose, there’s basically nothing that I know in full detail.”

Suimei didn’t have the means to investigate the Sacrament or its Lapis Judaicus. Even in the archives at the Society’s headquarters, there were no documents which described it in detail. He didn’t know whether such information had been lost over the passage of time, or if it was just something that had been kept hidden. But either way, his knowledge on the subject was limited. Upon informing the others of this, Felmenia frowned dourly.

“It’s something not even you know about, Suimei-dono...?”

“I mean, it’s not like I know everything.”

“But from what you’ve just said, bastard, you know of others that possess similar weapons?”

“Yeah, that’s certainly true, but... When they told me about it, I didn’t really get what they were saying.”

“You didn’t really get it?”

As Graziella’s expression grew more suspicious, Suimei reluctantly nodded. But Titania seemed to pick up on something in what he said.

“Now that you mention it, Faylia-dono also said something similar. She said she received an explanation of the weapon from the hero, but she couldn’t truly understand it.”

“Just as I thought...”

Suimei had also been told about the Sacrament by its owner before. However, for some reason, most of what he’d heard barely seemed like words or even intelligible sound. To hear everything

about the mysteries behind the Sacrament—in other words, to understand the concepts behind it—it seemed that there were certain special conditions that had to be met. Graziella then brought up another part of what Faylia had relayed to them.

“If I remember correctly, the elf at the temple said that it was something made to forestall the end of the world.”

“The end of the world?”

“That’s right. If you don’t believe me, ask anyone else—we were all there. Granted, this is assuming the elf remembered correctly.”

Suimei looked over to Titania, who nodded in confirmation. She’d heard the same thing. But to think the Sacrament was made to forestall the end of the world... There was only one thing that came to mind for Suimei when he heard that.

“In other words, it’s connected to twilight syndrome... It’s true I’ve heard about guys using one to beat down those beasts, but... they never mentioned anything about this...”

When he’d heard about the Sacrament, its owner hadn’t mentioned the end of the world. Did that mean they didn’t know everything about it either? No, just what did...

“Suimei, is there anything else that you know? For example, the method to turn the Sacrament into a weapon?” Titania asked.

“I’ve heard about it. I mean, I heard the words to transform it into a weapon, but didn’t actually *hear* them.”

“Is there anything needed other than the words?”

“What the Sacrament needs is a grounded understanding of the mysteries behind it and strong purpose, or so it seems. The grounded understanding is required, but when the owner of a sacrament has a strong purpose, that is when it first manifests... No, when it is first able to become a weapon.”

“A strong purpose... you say?”

That didn’t seem to mean much to Titania. She twisted up her face and groaned a little. On the other hand, Io Kuzami seemed to have noticed something.

“When it comes to strong purpose, there should be something that sticks out in your memories. When it happened, my fiancé was a tempest of powerful emotion. It is likely because of that that he was able to forcefully cause the Sacrament to transform.”

Titania and Graziella both nodded, seemingly coming to an understanding upon hearing what Io Kuzami said.

“If Reiji has the grounding to use the Sacrament, then isn’t it something he’ll eventually figure out one way or another? There’s no way for us to force anything if we don’t know the words,” said Suimei somewhat optimistically before moving on to his next question. “What was Reiji’s condition after the Sacrament turned back?”

“There was not any particular change. Just as we said before, he only became stronger temporarily.”

“So he was only stronger during the fight, huh...?”

“That’s right. However, he was instantly exhausted when it was over.”

The Sacrament was a weapon that ate mana. While in use, it was constantly consuming mana and vitality. According to the mysteries behind the Lapis Judaicus, the amount it consumed was designed to be small. Indeed, it was designed to make greatness from meagerness, but considering the scale of what the Sacrament was capable of accomplishing, the initial input was still considerably significant.

Reiji had the divine blessing from the hero summoning going for him. It strengthened him, but even then, compared to a magician in possession of a mana furnace or a proper Sacrament wielder, it wasn’t enough. However, considering his growth and potential—how much magic power and stamina he’d already developed since coming to this world—he would likely be able to provide enough energy to the Sacrament eventually. That was Suimei’s thought, but somewhere along the line, he fell silent...

“Is something the matter, Suimei-dono?”

Felmenia noticed that he’d gotten quiet, but he didn’t respond right away. He kept to himself a few moments longer, and then, seemingly having arrived at a resolution, let out a resigned sigh.

“No... I was just thinking it’s about time I need to tell Reiji.”

“Oh? That’s...”

“You mean about being a magician?”

Even from Suimei’s vague answer, Lefille and Felmenia were able to guess what he meant. Titania was in the same position.

“After all this time?” she asked with a composed expression.

“What? Is that something you should be saying after the chaos you caused earlier?”

“Just what are you talking about?”

The tomboy swordswoman princess seemed to be intent on pretending it had never happened. As Suimei looked at her playing dumb with a bitter face, Graziella—the only one in the room who didn’t know the circumstances—spoke up.

“Why have you not told him before now?”

“I was taught from day one to keep that quiet. So you could say the reason I didn’t speak up even after coming to this world is a carryover of that.”

“But in this world, he’d end up finding out eventually, wouldn’t he? Especially considering you’re investigating magic to return home. In the end, you’d have to reveal your secret in order to get back.”

“No, I could’ve just kept it hidden and half-assed an excuse for the

completed magicka circle. And once we got home, the details would be up to them to puzzle out. As long as they didn't have any regrets about leaving this place, who knows? It might never have even come up again."

"I see."

Suimei wanted to give them a way out. He, Reiji, and Mizuki had been summoned to this world against their will. But now that Reiji had taken up the Demon Lord's subjugation, there was no way Suimei or anyone else would be able to convince him to just up and go home. But if Suimei could come up with a way for them to come and go, he would be able to make that decision without fear of regret since he could always come back. Titania didn't much seem to like Suimei mentioning returning to their world, and turned a somewhat sharp gaze on him.

"So then, Suimei, why did you have a change of heart now after all this time?"

"That thing."

"That thing? You mean the Sacrament?"

"Yeah. If he's taken up that thing, there's no going back. Even once we make it home to our world, that won't be the end of it. There's a 100 percent guarantee he'll end up getting caught up in something else. And if the Society is going to look after him, then my identity will ultimately be revealed anyways."

Even if they managed to safely return home, considering Reiji's personality, he would inevitably get caught up in the mysteries of their world. Once a person who can't silently stand by the misfortune of others gained mystical powers, it was natural that they would begin sticking their head into all sorts of affairs. The others seemed to understand that, and all silently came to an agreement.

"Suimei-dono, will you tell him right away?"

"Hmm, no, I'll take it step by step... Probably."

Smiling like he was trying to dodge the real question, Lefille looked at him suspiciously.

"Suimei-kun, you're a good-for-nothing."

"Sh-Shut up, Lefille-san! Cut me some slack, will ya?!"

"Suimei... is such a coward... at the weirdest times."

Suimei was unable to respond to Liliana's words. It was Graziella who took a crack at him next.

"I don't really give a damn about you either way, but are you not worried your friendship with Reiji and Mizuki will suffer for this?"

"Yeah, Mizuki'll be pretty pissed for a while, but if I honestly open up to him, Reiji will... Well, he'll probably sympathize with me. He's not that narrow-minded a guy. It's true that there are some things that are hard to say after all this time, but..."

Suimei frowned as he put his hesitation into words. Rather than guilt weighing on him for not telling them, it was worry for what might befall them after they came to find out. All magicians accepted that magicka needed to be kept secret from the general public to prevent normal people from getting too deeply involved with mystical affairs. Humans were naturally attracted to the mysterious. Once their eyes were opened to the other side, it became easier for them to see things that ordinary people didn't. And easier for them to get sucked into the trouble that surrounded such things.

That was why, before coming to this world, Suimei had never planned on telling his best friends. It was why he'd hesitated to even after coming here. However, he couldn't deny that he was ultimately pigeonholing them. Suimei knew that Reiji would be understanding if he told him. That he wouldn't get mad. That it wouldn't ruin their friendship. But it would put him in danger, and that was what worried Suimei the most.

"Good grief... So it's come to this in the end, huh?" he said with a heavy sigh.

Soon after, Reiji came back inside in spirits that had been lifted high by the healing power of cats.

Chapter 2: Bad News Always Comes With Bad Weather

It was now the day after Suimei and Reiji's groups had arrived in Filas Philia. Suimei was outside with Felmenia in front of the house. The weather in the imperial capital today was quite clear, so they'd decided to get some air. Looking up, the sky was cut off by the surrounding buildings, creating a bright blue square overhead. The sunlight pouring down from it into the white plastered alleyway was dazzling.

As for what the two of them were up to on such a lovely day, it was nothing other than a magicka lecture. It was simply a magician's nature to devote time to studying the mysteries of the world whenever they could.

"I know we're doing another one today, but we've sure had a lot of these lectures now, huh?"

"Yes. We've been over modern magicka, mystical entropy, liturgical reduction, the manifestation of magicka circles, and of course how to use all sorts of magicka."

"And with all that, I do believe you now have a firm understanding of just what a magician truly is, Menia."

Just as he said, Suimei recognized how much Felmenia had grown, but she didn't necessarily see that progress for herself. She flashed a self-deprecating smile.

"I would like to think that was the case, but regrettably, I'm afraid I have no standard for comparison..."

"I think you're doing just fine. Remember yesterday? You urged Reiji and the others to reconsider the way they regard the attributes. And as long as you keep that kind of open mind, you should be good. The important part is that there isn't only one way of thinking. There is no single absolute law that establishes the phenomena of the world. So if you properly understand that there are multiple approaches, you're already on the right path."

"What do you mean by 'multiple approaches'?"

"In the world I come from, science is advanced and widespread. People use it as a universal measure for everything. However, in truth, science isn't the only explanation for the phenomena of the world. There are also mystical theories, right? In short, the point is just not to get caught up in a single paradigm."

“Ummm...”

“Okay, when I first told you about magicka, you never thought you could manifest mysteries without the mediation of the Elements, right?”

“Yes, that much is certainly true.”

No matter what it was, only once a theory was understood would there be progress. Results required recognition and revelation—the so-called “eureka moment.”

“In our world, everything is thought of from a physical perspective. It’s a world dominated by the doctrine of the material. All of existence is measured by objects and the way they interact, either with other objects or the forces of the physical world. And no matter the interaction, they believe heat is produced.”

That was precisely why, even if fire was created magically, a modern person would see it and immediately assume there was a physical, chemical change occurring where the phenomenon took place. But that was only natural; their understanding had stagnated.

“I see... So the average person from your world, Suimei-dono, would think that the heat emitted as a result of spells and other mystical forces was equivalent to regular heat. And in assuming so, they inherently deny the mystical from the start.”

To learn magicka, it was important to un-learn that there must be heat in order to create anything.

“Yup. Just like you said, Menia, because those who are governed by ‘reason’ are unable to recognize the mystical, they only believe what they can see with their own eyes. And because they’re unable to get past that, they’re unable to follow through on true understanding. Magicka is only accessible to someone once they get over that hurdle.”

And there was an important difference between understanding and true understanding. Fumbling forward with a half-baked understanding would never lead to results. That applied to any field of study.

“The preamble was a little long, but it’s about time we got down to business. Today’s topic will be...”

Felmenia leaned forward intently, and, perhaps because Suimei was drawing things out, a strange amount of anticipation was building up. A silent drumroll resounded in his head as he watched Felmenia bite her lip anxiously. And at long last...

“How to produce a mana furnace.”

“How to produce a mana furnace?! You said mana furnace, did you not?!”

Hearing the topic of the day’s lecture, Felmenia grew even more worked up. She was practically trembling with eager excitement. If Suimei was finally willing to explain the inner workings of a mana

furnace to her, this was a proud day for her as his student.

“So, how *does* one achieve a mana furnace? Putting together what I’ve heard you say before, I believe it entails one’s internal organs somehow. But it’s rather hard to imagine the addition of a new one...”

Felmenia had already been postulating about how a mana furnace worked. She’d witnessed Suimei’s in action on multiple occasions and had seen its power with her own eyes. As a blossoming, curious magician, she’d spent plenty of time contemplating it. And as she began excitedly rattling off her theories, Suimei urged her to calm down before proceeding.

“A mana furnace is indeed like an internal organ, but it’s more nuanced than that. It’s not exactly corporeal, so saying that you’d be adding a new organ is a bit literal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Rather than physically, it’s added spiritually.”

“Spiritually?”

“That’s right. It makes use of the ethereal body.”

Hearing that phrase for the first time, Felmenia knit her brow.

“The ethereal body? You said before that aetheric was an intangible power in the atmosphere. Is this somehow different?”

“Yeah. It’s a bit convoluted, but it’s something different from that.”

With that answer, the wrinkle in Felmenia’s brow grew more pronounced. Suimei saying this was convoluted was a bit of an understatement, so her reaction was only natural. Even if he wasn’t referring to the aetheric as identified by mysticology, there were a great number of other things known as ether or ethereal. There was no way *not* to be confused at the beginning of such an explanation.

“Then, from context, am I right in assuming it’s something related to the physical body and the astral body?”

But despite the complexity of the topic at hand, it seemed Felmenia was already starting to get her head around it. As she slowly connected the dots in her mind, Suimei nodded in response to her question.

“Exactly right, Menia. The ethereal body is indeed related to those. The ethereal body, physical body, and astral body are considered the three pillars that comprise all living beings. In short, what we know as the human body is actually all three taken together. When one part of that—one of the three bodies—is damaged, the human in question loses its equilibrium and suffers for it.”

“Then the physical body is of course the material manifestation that is a human, the astral body is connected to the consciousness and the soul, and the ethereal body is...”

“You could say the ethereal body is the spiritual portion, but

phrasing it like that, it's easily confused with the astral body which holds the soul. So instead, let's see... Roughly speaking, the ethereal body is like a blueprint for the physical body."

"A blueprint for the physical body?"

"Yup. It's different from DNA, but mystically speaking, it's functionally similar. Every organ and feature of the human body is created based on the blueprint of the ethereal body. It's the origin of the physical form, which is always influenced by it. It's not something you can capture an image of or see with magicka, but just like the physical body, there exists an ethereal heart, an ethereal brain, ethereal arms, legs, et cetera."

"It... exists? If it is a blueprint, then after the physical body is made, isn't it no longer necessary?"

"Certainly the nuance of the world 'blueprint' would imply that, but... In truth, it's like an operational manual for the human body, as well as a map. The ethereal body is such that the human body always seeks to mirror it..."

"Wh-What...?"

"Sorry, that's not the point here. What I'm trying to say is that while the ethereal body is a blueprint for the physical body, once that job is complete, it additionally functions like a set of instructions for operating the physical body."

"I see. That much I can understand."

With Felmenia up to speed, Suimei moved on to the heart of the matter.

"Then the rest should follow logically. If the ethereal body is a blueprint, then..."

"We just need to rewrite that blueprint!"

"Exactly."

The point of this lecture was just as Felmenia guessed. Each of the three pillars had special characteristics and influenced the others. When the physical body felt fatigue, naturally, the consciousness and the soul would weaken. When the astral body was damaged, the physical body was also weakened. And just the same way, when there were alterations to the ethereal body, it produced changes in the physical and even astral body. This was all ultimately an arguable weakness of the human body and posed several disadvantages. But at the same time, there were benefits to be reaped from it as well. The mana furnace was one of them. And after leading Felmenia to that realization, Suimei continued his explanation.

"To use the ethereal body to alter the physical body, one must alter the subject's consciousness using a staged approach. By consciously reforming oneself as a magician, the astral body is first urged to transform based on that self-conception. The next step is to

alter one's own ethereal body using magicka, which in turn alters the physical body. The change will be gradual, but once it happens, that will also have an effect on the astral body. In the end, one eventually arrives again at a state where all three pillars are aligned."

After concluding a detailed explanation, Suimei moved on to summarizing his point.

"So in short, by altering the blueprint for the body, we're not actually increasing the number of internal organs. We're just adding a new functionality to the physical body. It's commonly referred to as a 'dream organ,' and when it was first discovered, achieving it was also thought of as increasing the number of spiritual internal organs."

"Ooh, a theory that gives a glimpse into the depths of the mysteries!"

Felmenia rose from her chair with a clenched fist in the air. It was a demonstration of curious and eager excitement, the kind only kindled in a magician upon reaching a revelation regarding a new mystery. In stark contrast to her excitement, however, Suimei's expression became severe. And what left his mouth next was a warning.

"However, once you tamper with your ethereal body, you will no longer strictly be human. You'll be tampering with the blueprint that makes you human in the first place, after all. Not only your physical body, but your astral body will change as a result. Change in inhuman ways."

She would lose her humanity. Feeling the full weight of those words left Felmenia speechless. Sacrificing one's humanity was not a decision to be made lightly. Short of being raised like Suimei had since early childhood, any normal person would hesitate, if not outright turn back at this juncture.

"This is one of the reasons I call the most outrageous of magicians in the world I'm from monsters. They're extremely powerful and, as such, have tampered with their ethereal bodies to their heart's content. They make their lifespans inexhaustible and their mana preposterous. There are even those who have gained a stock of souls or have transcended death.

"T-T-Transcended death?! You mean to say they're immortal?!"

"Technically, no. It would be more accurate to say it's just really difficult for them to die. They're no longer subject to the standard confines of mortality. For example, they cannot be killed by conventional weapons and they're impervious to disease. They can't even die of old age, as they've been released from the natural limitations of a normal lifespan. We call such beings lichens."

"To live beyond the burdens of mortality must be a dark, incredible power..."

“Yeah, but... those weirdos are really limited to only a tiny fraction of the guys with the talent to pull it off. It’s not something everyone can or wants to become.”

Suimei tacked that on, but it didn’t fully assuage Felmenia’s fear and surprise. Immortality was one of humanity’s perpetual dreams. Even if Felmenia could never grasp it with her own hands, she was beyond astounded to learn that there were others who had already seized it for themselves.

“There is a saying that we magicians know not the limits of expansion. Really, you could say it’s only after a normal human tampers with their ethereal body that they truly become a magician.”

Magicians were different from regular humans. This applied not just in their way of life, but their very existence. They were living beings of heightened mysticism. They could elevate their spirits to the next level and fire off the intense psychic chill brought about by magicka. They could manifest golden eyes, and they had a general disinterest in machines. They were so far removed from humanity that perhaps it was indeed fair to say they were no longer human at all.

“...Then as I am now, even though I can use magicka, I am still not fully a magician, correct?”

“That’s about the size of it. It would be more proper to say you’re just a magicka user. But that’s all circumstantial.”

“But this also means I can *become* a magician, no?!”

Felmenia pumped both of her clenched fists into the air. To her, this was a clear step towards a goal. Discovering it had likely motivated her.

“Speaking of, about your assignment from here on, Menia...”

“I have also given that consideration. I have a large task ahead of me.”

“So you’ve already realized what you need now?”

“The answer is firepower, no?”

“Hmm?”

Felmenia was making a serious expression, just like the one Reiji had when talking about the demon general. But because what had come out of her mouth was such a large leap from what Suimei was thinking, he couldn’t hide his astonishment. Felmenia seemed to be looking for confirmation, however, so she proceeded to explain herself.

“I have been thinking about it for some time now. My magicka simply does not have enough firepower... What is the matter, Suimeidono?”

Felmenia grew doubtful when Suimei offered no response whatsoever. His eyes had turned to blank dots like he was completely flummoxed.

“Er, yeah... By all means, please continue...”

“Back in the fight with Jillbert-dono, even with Lily’s support, I was forced on the defensive. I have been contemplating it ever since—how I could have done things differently, how I could have improved the situation. I’ve also carefully been assessing the way I’ve fought up until now and comparing it with other means I know...”

“And so, why firepower?”

“You see, after looking back at the fight with you, Suimei-dono, I think that firepower is what I was missing.”

“Huh?! Me?!”

“Additionally, when it comes to strong mages in this world, Graziella-dono’s attacks also have a great deal of firepower. Even watching Lefille fight with a sword, I have seen her cut into her opponents’ attacks with sheer strength. Thusly, I have come to the conclusion that I too need an increase in firepower.”

Felmenia grew more and more passionate as she talked. But for all her enthusiasm, it seemed Suimei had nothing to say. Or rather, he didn’t know what *to* say. Felmenia had taken this and run—quite ardently—in a different direction.

It was true that both Lefille and Suimei had a number of powerful single-strike attacks meant to put direct pressure on their opponents. But in Suimei’s opinion, he thought Felmenia’s role was more delicate than that. She was always the one who’d taken care of the housework and clerical work for the group, jobs that required attention to detail. The way she worked was modest and meticulous, and that showed in her magicka. The fact that she’d come to such an astute conclusion in regards to her own skills was proof of that.

But... if she’s so delicate by nature, then shouldn’t it be alright for her to focus on upping her firepower?

In this world, there was certainly no harm in possessing powerful magic. And with Felmenia being so modest and meticulous, there was no need to worry about how she would use it.

“Is something the matter, Suimei-dono?”

“...No, you’re right. Let’s increase your firepower, Menia. Shall we concentrate on controlling bigger spells and giving them your own flavor?”

“Yes, please!”

“Well, before that, about the medical treatment regarding the ethereal body and the manufacture of an altar...”

But just as Suimei started to explain what creating a mana furnace would actually entail...

“Hmm?”

He suddenly heard someone coming from down the alleyway. Because the alleyway they were standing in only led to the house, it

likely meant that either Lefille and the others had returned or that some other visitor had arrived. Because the alleys of the imperial capital were so complicated, however, it could also just be someone who'd gotten lost.

When Suimei and Felmenia looked down the alleyway, what they spotted was a girl dressed in the robes of the Church of Salvation. She was out of breath and holding herself up with one hand on the wall, so it was plain to see she was both exhausted and in a hurry. But this girl was no stranger. There was no mistaking the attendant priestess of the hero of El Meide, Christa.

"What are..."

Before Suimei could even finish his question, Christa began explaining between ragged breaths.

"I... I apologize for being so abrupt, but the matter is urgent... I need to speak with the hero of Astel..."

"To Reiji?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Just what in the world happened?"

"Elliot-sama... Elliot-sama went to Duke Hadorious's mansion..."

And he hadn't come back. Hearing the story, Suimei and Felmenia immediately moved into action.



It was already afternoon by the time Christa made it to Suimei's residence. And with her came dark clouds rolling in like ominous heralds of the news she brought. The heavens that had been clear and blue earlier now looked like they might open at any minute. Because of that, Lefille and the others quickly returned from their outing as well. So, in an unexpectedly short amount of time, everyone had gathered in the living room of the Yakagi residence. Seeing this, Io Kuzami was the first to open her mouth.

"So, just what has happened that you'd suddenly gather everyone like this? I do believe we sufficiently discussed everything yesterday."

Christa beheld Io Kuzami, who was sitting there with both her arms and legs crossed, with a quizzical gaze. She looked like Mizuki, after all, but was speaking like Graziella. During the incident in the imperial capital, Christa had been Mizuki's opponent and had learned a good deal about her personality that way, leaving her completely baffled to see her like this now. Although, to be fair, that applied to almost everyone present.

"Don't worry about Mizuki. Some stuff happened and her personality changed; that's all."

"R-Reiji-sama, what exactly does that mean...?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to leave it at that..."

Reiji shook his head as if to say, "Just don't ask." Seeing this, Christa questioned him no further on the matter. After that, Felmenia looked around the room curiously.

"Her Imperial Highness Graziella does not seem to be present..."

"She had some business to take care of... and said that she would be late," replied Liliana.

"Is that so?"

"It's fine if she doesn't come," spat Lefille.

As a princess, Graziella was likely quite busy now that she was back in her own country, but that wasn't at all why Lefille was so quick to write off her absence. It seemed she was still harboring some lingering bitterness of the incident the previous day. Any mention of Graziella's name provoked a strong response from her.

Putting the matter of Graziella aside, however, Reiji already seemed to have an inkling as to what was going on.

"Hey, if Christa-san is here and Elliot isn't, then..."

"Yeah, she already told us, but you should hear it from her."

Urged on by Suimei, Christa began explaining with a gloomy expression.

"It was about one week ago... Elliot-sama and I were on our way to Astel as part of our mission. When we reached the westernmost town of Kurant City, he received an invitation from Duke Hadorious through the Church of Salvation."

The first to react to hearing Hadorious's name was Titania.

"The duke, you say?"

"Yes. To show his hospitality, he insisted that Elliot-sama visit his mansion."

Hearing that, the color drained from both Titania and Reiji's faces. They'd also been summoned by Hadorious while in Kurant City, so they had some idea as to what that invitation really meant.

"On that day, I was terribly worn out. Elliot-sama was kindly considerate of my condition and left me at the church to rest while he went to visit the duke on his own. But... Elliot-sama never returned."

"So you think something happened?"

"Yes. I asked the church what had become of him. They claimed that while Elliot-sama went to the duke's mansion, the duke was resting, so Elliot-sama was never received."

"Did you contact the Holy State about this?" asked Felmenia.

"I did contact them, but... Their reply was not favorable."

"Not favorable? Even though he's their hero?" asked Reiji.

"Duke Hadorious sends a fairly large donation to the Holy State every year," answered Titania. "There's a possibility they may have been complicit in whatever happened."

"So he had a carte blanche? But why..."

Reiji groaned with a severe expression, which Christa mirrored sympathetically.

“I do not understand what reason His Grace would have to restrain Elliot-sama, and I am left without recourse...”

Christa wasn't in a position to confront Hadorious directly. That was probably the main issue. And as long as there was no evidence that any harm had come to the hero, she couldn't even accuse him of anything. There was also the big question of what exactly Hadorious's motives were. As everyone else scratched their heads over the emerging mystery, Lefille seemed to have an idea. She quietly raised her hand from where she was sitting.

“May I say something?”

“Sure.”

“Very recently, we also had a strange encounter regarding the heroes. Isn't this probably related?”

“Regarding the heroes? Aah, you mean Universal Apostles?”

“Then Duke Hadorious is in league with the lot who attacked the hero in the Alliance?”

“The possibility exists, but that's about all we can say for now.”

Lefille, Suimei, and Reiji practically started having a conversation of their own while Christa stared at them blankly. She couldn't piece together what they were talking about based on the fragments of information she heard, so Liliana began explaining it to her.

“A little while ago... as I believe you might know, Christa-san... we went to the Alliance. When we did... the hero of the Alliance... was attacked by... a certain group. They call themselves... the Universal Apostles. We don't know the reason yet... but they tried to kidnap... the hero of the Alliance.”

“So that's why you suspect Duke Hadorious may be a part of this group?”

“At present, there's no other group we know of trying to pick a fight with the heroes besides the demons, after all,” replied Suimei. “The only other thing that I can think of is that the entire nation of Astel is attempting to do something, but that doesn't seem quite right.”

Suimei offered his conjecture with a bitter expression, like he was remembering something unpleasant. Hadorious had some personal motive in mind, and there was that group that was trying to use the heroes for some scheme. The possibilities were endless, but the probability that they were related seemed high, given the timing. But surprisingly, the one to offer a counterargument to this was Titania.

“It is just my personal opinion, but I find it hard to believe that Duke Hadorious is in league with the Universal Apostles.”

Hearing her say that, Suimei knit his brow.

“How unexpected. I thought you didn’t like him, Tia?”

“C-Certainly not. But while he is someone I find personally detestable, he is still a noble of Astel. Duke Hadorious is my father’s most loyal subject. That man serving two masters is more unlikely than heaven and earth reversing.”

Hearing Titania’s declaration, a wave of surprise washed over everyone else in the room. They all knew that she hated him, so hearing her come to his defense was rather startling. Felmenia too spoke up as his fellow countryman.

“I have heard that Duke Hadorious has been by His Majesty King Almadious’s side since a young age. That the two of them ran through both battlefields and the political stage together. His Majesty’s trust in him is deep, and the duke’s loyalty is the same. That is also why all affairs concerning Astel’s hero were entrusted to him... However, taking into account the current situation, is there not sufficient cause to suspect Duke Hadorious?”

“Yes. Even if he is not involved with Universal Apostles, I cannot deny that he’s clearly plotting something in regards to the heroes. I believe he is acting with Astel in mind. However...”

There, Titania groaned. It seemed she was having difficulty reconciling the disparity between her personal assessment of Hadorious and his current actions. But either way, there was no obvious explanation as to what he’d done with Elliot. She couldn’t say with confidence that things would be alright. As the room filled with a strange tension at her silence, Reiji spoke up.

“Sounds like we’re going back to Kurant City.”

“Yes, that does seem to be the case.”

“That is quite a hurried decision, but if it is what my fiancé wishes, then so be it. I will follow along and grace you with my presence.”

And just as Reiji, Titania and Io Kuzami came to an agreement...

“No, I’ll have you wait before you do that.”

The door to the living room suddenly burst open. It was Graziella, her open military coat and her golden hair fluttering majestically over her shoulders. After a brief moment of surprise at her appearance, Suimei narrowed his eyes at her reproachfully.

“You, just entering as you please again...”

“This is my country. I may enter where I please, no?”

“Barging into my fucking house without permission is an invasion of privacy!”

“I’ve told you not to speak in such strange terms. If you wish to communicate, then use concepts from this world, you fool.”

Seeing Suimei start to growl after being insulted, Reiji cut in to the conversation.

“So, what do you mean about having us wait?”

“A demon invasion has been confirmed to the north. At this rate, the Empire will become a battlefield.”

Following Graziella’s frank explanation, Lefille and Titania stood up with great vigor, sending their chairs backward. Still gripped with surprise, Titania cut straight to the point.

“Your Imperial Highness, what is the scale of their forces?”

“I don’t have a precise count, but I hear there is a great deal of them. Enough that we will probably have to summon the entirety of the Imperial Army to make a stand.”

“So suddenly...?” Reiji remarked with a furrowed brow.

It was a good point to be concerned on. The invasion was certainly abrupt. However, Suimei had an idea as to why that might be.

“I see. Since they lost a few generals, they’re trying to rally here.”

So far, Suimei and the others defeated three demon generals: Rajas, Mauhario, and Vuishta. And for all the losses on the demon side, not a single hero had fallen. The demons were probably panicking. And so, to rally their forces, they’d set their eyes on the Nelferian Empire, which bordered both the Kingdom of Astel and the Saadias Alliance, including the self-governed state. It was a key stop on almost any major trade route. Cutting it off would be devastating. And if it fell entirely... the effect would be unfathomable.

“I’ll go ahead and say it—there won’t be any reinforcements from our neighboring countries.”

“What do you mean, Your Imperial Highness?”

The one to question Graziella was none other than Titania. Nelferia and Astel were allies precisely because they shared such an important border. To her, it was obvious that they should be cooperating in such a situation. It would be completely baffling for them not to. So, as a princess of Astel, she wanted to know why Graziella thought her people wouldn’t come to Nelferia’s aid.

“First, there’s the self-governed state. They’ve already sent their troops to the Alliance and cannot afford to spare any more. As for Astel, because they are in the middle of cleaning up from the previous demon invasion, taking countermeasures against future invasions, and assisting refugees from other nations, we were informed that they would not be able to offer assistance.”

Hearing Graziella’s explanation, Lefille wrinkled her brow and groaned.

“I understand the situation, but... How can I say it? I don’t exactly admire that position.”

“But there’s a reason for it. Have you not heard the rumors going around Astel, the Alliance, and the self-governed state?”

“Aah, that the Empire has been expanding its military and keeping its neighboring countries in check? I heard from Liliana that it was deceptive maneuvering... Is that related?”

“It is. Even though the Empire is prepared to fight against the demons, no one is making a move. Seriously, just what kind of nerves do they have? They have no sense of danger.”

Even though the demons were invading, no one was cooperating. It was a source of contention and disappointment for Graziella.

“Tia, is that really possible?”

“Yes. To turn a blind eye to the crisis of an allied country is not a particularly strange occurrence. As long as the Empire’s allies know the Empire is being invaded by demons, there will be a fight regardless of what happens. Anyone who participates will suffer military and financial losses. Even if there’s fallout afterward, with a weakened military and economy, the Empire won’t be able to do much about it...”

“The Empire’s neighboring countries are probably looking forward to such a decline.”

Graziella let out a derisive snort, but not at Titania. She knew it wasn’t her personal intention to hold back assistance. Suimei leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

“But I’m pretty sure if the Empire falls, everyone’s gonna suffer for it.”

“That’s just the thing, Suimei-kun. If the Empire does fall, what will its neighboring countries do then? Taking up the just cause of saving humanity from the demons, they could send their armies into the Empire freely. And the Empire is a tough country. If it does fall, it won’t be without a long, hard fight with the demons, who would then be exhausted by the time the other countries showed up... I don’t really have to say it, but the things that they want to do would be accomplished easily at that point.”

“Jeez, talk about a rock and a hard place...”

“I don’t know if that’s the actual reason, but it’s a distinct possibility.”

Hearing Lefille say that, Titania objected.

“I find it hard to believe my father would play such a hand.”

“I agree. His Majesty Almadious would much rather do something to earn the Empire’s gratitude in this situation. I cannot imagine that the court would overrule him on that.”

“Then it’s a question of whether my father is being prevented from moving as he pleases, or if the appropriate information is not being relayed to him. And I agree the former is impossible.”

“While that may be true,” Graziella cut in, “it is still dangerous for the Empire to fight alone. Thus, henceforth, I would like to formally

appeal to Your Royal Highness, Felmenia-dono, and Hero Reiji to take part in the battle and intercept the demons on behalf of the Empire.”

“I see, so that’s why you want them to wait. If they’re dragged into something else, then you’d lose your only shot at support.”

“That’s the size of it.”

Sitting down in a chair with a thump, Graziella affirmed Suimei’s statement. However...

“But in that case, Elliot-sama will...!”

“I am more than aware that Hero Elliot’s case is important, but we will all be in trouble if the Empire falls. Besides, those guys likely don’t intend to move the hero right away.”

“That’s true, but...”

Unable to get any cooperation, Christa was left completely despondent. Taking pity, Reiji spoke up on her behalf.

“Wouldn’t it be possible for the Empire to do something, even if it’s in secret?”

“Even if we do, it will all be in vain. If a priestess from the Holy State is coming to us for help, that means the Holy State won’t be providing any assistance. Right now, the Empire’s relation with the Holy State is of serious importance, so even if we tried to intervene secretly, nothing good would come out of it. Rather than clinging on to the Empire...”

Graziella then turned her gaze on Titania.

“It is only proper that I do something or other from my end, right? Understood. I shall send a letter to father to call attention to this... Though it may already be too late now that Duke Hadorious has already made such a bold move.”

It was a very reasonable concern. If he’d already gone this far, things were likely going according to his plan. Even if they got the aid of the king, it might be too little too late.

“Then as I feared, Elliot-sama will...”

Have to be postponed. It was easy to guess what Christa was thinking. Strangely enough, Io Kuzami was the one to speak up next.

“Ultimately, whether or not we head off to the battlefield is all up to my fiancé, is it not? None of you lot will be able to ignore his will if he wishes to go, or if he wishes to refrain.”

With that, she looked to Reiji as if to ask what he would ultimately decide. Elliot needed to be saved. But if Reiji went to go and save Elliot, he would be forsaking Graziella—the entire Empire. It was tough, but the time had come for him to make his decision. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before answering.

“Christa-san, I’m sorry... I think I have to prioritize the demon threat.”

“No, Hero-sama. Vanquishing the demons is the hero’s true

purpose. I wouldn't stand in the way of that."

"Mm. But take heart. Even if Elliot has been captured, that doesn't mean any harm will befall him. After dealing with the demons at hand, let's go save him."

That was Reiji's decision. And once he made it clear, he turned to Suimei.

"Suimei, what will you guys do?"

"Us? Well..."

It was between taking part in the battle against the demons and going to save Elliot. Making that call was difficult for Suimei. He didn't feel strongly either way. Personally, because Reiji and Mizuki (in body) were headed into danger, he wanted to go with and support them. But because he also owed Elliot for Reiji's case a while back, he wasn't opposed to going to save him, either.

"Are you deadlocked, Suimei-kun?"

"Sorry, Lefi. I need your recommendation."

Sensing that Suimei was hesitating to make a choice, Lefille called out to him, to which he responded by raising his hands and asking for her opinion. At times like this, he was very grateful to have someone with a reputation as a capable leader around. Lefille had a certain persuasive power, and he was sure she could find a working solution.

The redhead who was only about as tall as an elementary school student leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. She looked like a small child thinking very hard over something, but the words that came out of her mouth were unmistakably adult.

"In this case, broadly speaking, we should prioritize the fight against the demons. But because what else is at play involves the heroes, it is also something we cannot ignore. Looking at the bigger picture, the heroes are an integral part of the fight against the demons. Losing them would be a tremendous blow. That being said, in the end, I still think it's a shoddy plan to divide our forces before the major threat that lies in front of us."

"Lefille-san and Sensei are a big part of our war potential, after all."

As Reiji gave his thoughts, Lefille added on an apology.

"Forgive us, Lady Christa, but the matter with the Holy State's hero will have to wait. Naturally, if the Empire's neighboring countries were to offer assistance and slow the demons' advance, things would be a different story."

"I understand."

"So we're going to fight the demons, huh? I feel like we just did that..."

While saying that, Suimei cocked his head to the side. Just how did those around him perceive this behavior? Was he under some kind

of misunderstanding, or was he just making a foolish display and pretending to forget? Those who had been travelling with Suimei looked at him like it was the latter.

“Goodness, how to put it...? Things just do not seem to be going Suimei-dono’s way.”

Her moderate tone didn’t have any sarcasm in it, but since Felmenia was smiling, she probably found this comical. She was likely intimating that Suimei didn’t really want to fight the demons, and this would be the third time he’d been forced to. Catching on, it was Reiji who followed up on her remark.

“You’ve been saying that you didn’t want to fight ever since we were at the castle. But considering your personality, things were bound to end up like this. You should’ve just come with us from the start.”

“Shut up! That would throw my plans out of order!”

“Then why didn’t you refuse now? Isn’t that your norm?”

“Ugh...”

He couldn’t say anything back to that. Looking around, the girls were astonished. Some were even giggling. Even Reiji, who had cornered him so, was pleasantly laughing. But it didn’t last long. When his laughter quieted down, he looked at Suimei earnestly.

“But seriously, Suimei, will you be alright?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I mean fighting. You’ll be up against demons. And a ton of them, at that.”

“It’ll work out. There’s plenty of strong people around. I can just discretely hide behind Lefi or Menia.”

“Casually hiding behind girls is a little... you know...”

“I’ve only got one life.”

Naturally, Suimei was only saying he’d do that because he didn’t want to reveal his abilities to Reiji. Reiji simply took his friend at face value, but Suimei’s travelling companions seemed none too happy about the way he was talking.

“My...”

“Ha... haha...”

“Suimei, should be sued... at least once.”

“What’s with you guys?”

A stern gaze, a bitter smile, and harsh words were all turned on him. Suimei tried to calm the three girls down, but to no avail.

“Then I will—”

As Christa began to speak, Graziella cut her off before she could finish her sentence.

“It should be fine for you to just stand by at the Church of Salvation. I understand that you are worried about your hero, but

until we have finished our preparations, absolutely do not act on your own.”

“...Understood.”

“And don’t worry so much. It will be sufficient if Reiji and the others lend a hand in the first battle. Once the prospect of victory is clear, they can go rescue El Meide’s hero.”

Graziella tried to cheer up the downcast Christa, but her words were perhaps overly optimistic.

“That’s only if we’re able to muster enough forces to proceed to the next stage...”

“Things with Astel should work out one way or the other. The problem is the Alliance and the self-governed state...”



The ones to express skepticism were Reiji and Titania, and they both had very real concerns. Since Titania was present, it was possible that Astel would make a move, but they had no such in with the Saadias Alliance.

“Hey, I just thought of something interesting.”

Suimei flashed a turbulent, mischievous smile. Seeing that, Reiji pulled back a little.

“Uh oh.... That’s the face you make whenever you think of something evil.”

“That ‘evil’ part was unnecessary, damn it.”

“So? Just what trouble did you think of this time?”

“Oh, just something that you and Christa need to collaborate on...”

Suimei then began explaining the sinister trick he’d concocted.



Since Reiji and Titania had declared their intent to aid the Empire, Astel’s response came quickly. With their hero and princess fighting against the demons, they no longer had the option of remaining spectators in the conflict and immediately announced that they would be sending reinforcements. With Titania making herself known, however, they had lost any advantage that was to be had from moving behind the scenes. But upon receiving their reply from the castle, it seemed not all of the information had reached the royal capital, which was something of a relief to Titania.

“Thank goodness, right?”

“It’s still too early to relax. Despite promising reinforcements, it’s not out of the question that it will take too long for them to organize and send troops.”

Such was the exchange between Reiji and Graziella. Things were going well, but as Graziella suggested, whether it would all really work out had yet to be determined. They weren’t exactly sure where the breakdown in communication had occurred, so it was possible they’d received faulty information and Astel’s army wasn’t actually marching at all. Or even that they might end up withdrawing if things got too bad in the Empire before they made it. Even if Astel had offered assistance in the Empire’s time of need, they would still do what they had to in order to protect themselves.

Suimei and the others were presently in the mountainous northern region of the Empire where the Imperial Army was preparing to advance on the demons. They were set up in the gently sloping foothills, but if they proceeded any further, the terrain quickly became much more precipitous. So much so that it made it difficult to gather

men and impossible to set up a base. That's why they'd chosen the hillside for their base camp.

With a cliff to its back, the encampment was a wide line of tents. There were impromptu defensive walls setup, groups of large wooden stakes positioned like pikes ready to receive charging horses, mages and archers waiting in trenches, and a large number of other soldiers amassing. It had only been a few days since the army first began to move, and the wilderness in the northern region of the country was constantly ravaged by the fury of strong winds. That they'd been able to build any encampment here at all under such conditions—especially so quickly—was in no small part thanks to the power of magic.

Anything that required moving earth or stone was handled by specialists of the earth attribute, work that required lumber was taken care of by specialists of the wood attribute, and so on. It seemed that a great number of such field magic users had gathered here, making for an impressively large encampment. Its abundance of mages was certainly a strong point of the Imperial Army.

And in a corner of the rather remarkable encampment, Suimei sat looking up at the clear sky overhead.

“As expected of such a high place, it's getting chilly...”

He wasn't talking to anyone in particular. He was simply remarking at the cold the harsh wind brought with it. It wasn't to the point he could see his breath, but it was a marked and unpleasant change from the weather in Filas Philia.

After getting an eyeful of the seemingly endless sky so typical of mountain regions, Suimei lowered his gaze down to the gravel path. Standing there in front of him was a still-tiny Lefille, her red ponytail blowing in the wind.

“Lefi, how's your body? Think you'll make it in time?”

“There's some feedback. A little more... Within a few days, I'll probably be able to return to my original form.”

“Sounds like it'll be fine.”

If Lefille herself was feeling feedback, then things were probably on schedule. Suimei had created a magicka circle to help her regain her body and had been performing the ritual to return her powers. So if she was beginning to feel the effects of it, then all was going smoothly.

Lefille actually didn't seem to suffer any for being in her reduced form. It was unknown whether or not that was because of the power of spirits, but her condition was almost enviable right now. The cute, frilly clothes she was wearing looked completely out of place on the battlefield.

But the far-off look on her face as she gazed nostalgically into the

sky was a different story. She seemed perfectly at peace in the cold, likely because she was from much farther north. She and Suimei stood there for a while admiring the heavens in a corner of the encampment before someone called out to them.

“Suimei-dono, Lefille.”

As Suimei turned to the familiar voice, he saw Felmenia approaching with some soldiers.

“What’s up, Menia?”

“It seems that a strategy meeting is being conducted in one of the large tents soon. Reiji-dono and Her Royal Highness are already headed there. If you’re not particularly busy, they have requested your attendance as well.”

Suimei gave a nod, and both he and Lefille followed Felmenia. After passing by a jumbled mess of stockpiled goods, several watchtowers, countless tents stuffed with soldiers, and two mess halls, they finally arrived at the large tent. Inside were several of the the generals and staff officers they’d met earlier, all silently seated around a table. Following Felmenia’s guidance, Suimei and Lefille took their seats near Reiji’s group. The general in charge of the meeting was Graziella’s older brother, the first imperial prince of the Empire, Reanat Filas Rieseld.

He had majestic ornaments in his long, blond hair, and his slender figure was beautifully robed in exquisite clothes. Graziella sat next to him as he grandly took his place at the head of the table. As was the case during the incident in the Empire, it seemed he was the type to take matters into his own hands. He was likely working to amass achievements as the next in line for the throne, but that was neither here nor there right now.

“First, I would like to greet our guests here today,” Reanat began. “Your Royal Highness Titania, it was good of you to come. If not for you, then Astel would likely not have taken action. You have my thanks.”

“I also have my doubts about the attitude of my country. It is an honor to be of assistance.”

Titania elegantly bowed her head in response to Reanat’s gratitude. It was somewhat exaggerated for a simple greeting, and she didn’t seem to relish it any, but as royals, they both had their positions and customs to mind. After their somewhat questionable exchange, Reanat greeted Reiji and Felmenia as well. And eventually, his gaze fell on Liliana, who was sitting at the far end of the table.

“It is quite strange to greet someone who I’ve lost as a subordinate under such circumstances, is it not, Liliana Zandyke?”

His voice completely devoid of sarcasm, Reanat offered a slight smile. Indeed, he had no reason to be critical. Liliana’s release from

the Elite Twelve had been negotiated with him directly, after all.

“I’m here at the encampment... because Suimei is here.”

“Our other guest from another world?”

“Yes. It has been a while since we last met.”

Suimei turned to Reanat and gave him a modest greeting. He meant to be fairly formal, but both Graziella and Reanat looked somewhat confused.

“Oh? Your manner of speaking is quite different today, is it not?”

“That’s because the circumstances are quite different from our previous encounter.”

“I see. I am quite obliged for your consideration.”

Last time they met, during the incident in the capital, Suimei and the prince were at tense odds with one another. But this time, Suimei had come to cooperate. The prince wasn’t an enemy—moreover, he was royalty and older than Suimei—so he was polite accordingly. And because Suimei was a guest from another world, Reanat treated him with equal respectability.

“Allow me to first express my gratitude to you as well. You have my thanks for sharing your plan to spur the Alliance and the self-governed state into action.”

After Reanat expressed his thanks, Graziella turned a delighted smile on Suimei.

“To think that Reiji would make that kind of declaration...”

“Aah...”

Upon receiving such unexpected praise for what happened, Suimei thought back to when he’d first brought up his plan. It was a few days ago when they were all sitting in his living room contemplating what they might do about the other nations.

“Try saying that if they aren’t going to send reinforcements or support, you won’t save them.”

That was what Suimei had proposed to Reiji with an impish smile on his lips. It must have sounded like the devil on his shoulder was talking. But nevertheless, Reiji had accepted and followed through. After passing along that declaration through the Church of Salvation, as one would expect, the bubble the Alliance and the self-governed state were maintaining around themselves burst and they immediately declared their intent to send reinforcements and support. Whether it was just the threat that a hero wouldn’t come to help them when the demons attacked or whether they took such a threat as a sign of losing the Goddess’s favor was uncertain. But one thing it did make quite clear was the influence the heroes had.

“It was quite the clever plan, and something we never would have thought of. At first, we were satisfied that refugees from the north were being accepted, but we have unexpectedly gained quite a bit of

leeway. It was a very satisfactory hand to play.”

“It really wasn’t all that much... I’m a little doubtful that nobody else could have thought of it.”

“That... To the people of this world, they are shirking their obligation to the heroes. If a hero is wronged, there is a history of that debt being definitively paid back. So for a hero to say they will not save a country, that would force their hand in the extreme. Defying them would be like defying the Goddess herself—truly unthinkable.”

“I see...”

Hearing this, Suimei was convinced. Just as Reanat said, a hero was a divine messenger to the countries. In other words, they were in a near absolute position of authority. Neither Astel nor the Alliance would have ever dreamed of manipulating Reiji or Hatsumi. Hadorious was an obvious exception, but so much as coercing the hero into doing something—even if there was no ill will—was bad enough. But if a country incurred the hero’s displeasure, they never knew what kind of calamity would befall them. Moreover, since the heroes were champions of the Goddess, blatantly defying them could be considered sacrilege.

It was then that Suimei realized that though all the eyes on him were severe, there was a great sense of relief in them. The people at the strategy meeting had beheld him as a dubious stranger at first, but upon learning he was a good friend of the hero who’d come to help, there was no longer a harshness in the way they looked at him. If anything, they beheld him with admiration now. It seemed both soldiers and nobles alike treated matters related to the heroes as something sacred.

“Now, without ado, I would like to discuss our plans. There are those here who already know, but the vanguard has already moved out to slow the demons’ advance. Until the reinforcements and support arrive from the other nations, I would like all sides to disperse and contribute to stalling the demons as well.”

Reanat had both his hands on the table and was giving a brief summary of what was to come. In short, they were buying time until their preparations were complete. Lefille, who seemed to have doubts about this plan, politely raised her hand.

“Your Imperial Highness Reanat, dividing soldiers on this scale for the sake of buying time seems far too haphazard. Though it is only my humble opinion, would it not be a better idea to gather the forces and intercept the demons together?”

She saw Reanat’s plan to sequentially throw his forces in small groups at the demons as a poor move. Certainly, however, in terms of resources, it also seemed like a waste of war potential to throw the entire army at the demons at once. Lefille was moreso thinking that it

would be better to use the encampment and the terrain to their advantage to engage the enemy in a serious strategic battle.

“...?”

However, Lefille received no reply to her unreserved opinion. Instead, Reanat simply seemed to be staring at her in curious wonderment. He even cocked his head to the side.

“Your Imperial Highness, is something the matter?”

“Ah, no. My apologies, but are you truly the Shrine Maiden of Noshias?”

“Y-Yes, I am.”

“Is that so...? I-I see.”

Reanat sighed a bit upon confirming Lefille’s identity. That and the slight grimace on his face indicated the disconnect he was experiencing between what was seeing and what he was being told. Her brother still clearly confused, Graziella spoke up in a deliberately insulting tone.

“Elder brother, it seems that because of the spirits’ power, Shrine Maiden-dono ends up stumpy like that sometimes.”

“Stumpy?! What do you mean, stumpy?!?”

After scowling at Graziella for a while, Lefille cleared her throat in a manner quite unbecoming of her current appearance and addressed the still-confounded prince.

“Due to certain circumstances, I am currently in this form. But there’s no need to worry. I will regain my original form within a few days.”

“A-Ah. It is quite difficult to have a body entrusted with the power of the spirits, I see...”

And with that, the conversation about Lefille’s current condition came to an end. Reanat had nothing more to ask her. It was often said that when people experienced things that were difficult to comprehend or talk about, they simply didn’t address them at all. That wasn’t too far from what was happening here. Lefille was like the tiny elephant in the room.

Yet despite the mystery surrounding her, no one regarded Lefille with suspicion. She was a companion of the hero, after all. Suimei believed this was yet another example of Reiji’s influence at work. But in any event, as the conversation about her came to an end, Reanat quickly changed gears and tightened his expression.

“Well then, about your earlier question, the reason we are focusing on stalling for the time being is because we anticipate that our reinforcements will likely arrive later than planned.”

“Meaning?”

“Just as you said, Shrine Maiden-dono, rather than dispersing our forces, we have the option of uniting and clashing with the demons as

one. If we can hold them back for now, we would likely be able to drive them back once joined by reinforcements. It would be a steady battle. I also thought of this at first, but the situation has changed. I no longer believe we'll be able to gather all our forces in this encampment. Therefore, we will disperse for now and slow down the demons' advance while we plan for the real battle further back. I judged that this would be more reliable."

As Reanat explained his plan in a somewhat self-deprecating tone, it was Titania who raised her hand this time.

"Your Imperial Highness, in that case, it sounds to me like you plan on abandoning this encampment..."

"That is correct. Does Your Royal Highness believe this to be a waste?"

"Though it may be imprudent of me."

"No, forgive me. I said something obstinate like my younger sister would. As our army is abundant with mages, it is not a terrible blow to us to lose one encampment. In other words, we shall lure the demons in. And until our preparations are complete, we shall only go as far as stalling them. Then we will abandon the encampment and quickly fall back. After that, we will carry out the decisive battle at a much larger encampment prepared further to the rear. That is what we ultimately mean to do."

It was a befitting plan for the current situation. Rather than rushing into things for the sake of glory, Reanat had properly considered the circumstances at hand.

As he was suggesting, if they abandoned the encampment and retreated, the demons would think they were fleeing and likely chase them down like animals. And if they were lying in wait for the demons as they came, it very well might be possible to crush them all. The earthbound demons and the demons that flew naturally travelled at different speeds, so their forces were divided while on the move—including in pursuit. On top of that, the mountain terrain was rugged and severe. It made it difficult to keep any kind of formation, so the probability of the demons falling into such a trap was even higher.

But if the demons turned things around like they had in the Alliance with Hatsumi and began moving and working in ways that defied all expectations, things could get ugly at any time. But there was no point making such a statement this far into things, so Suimei kept quiet and simply stroked his chin as he nursed such thoughts. Meanwhile, Reanat got to where Suimei's group came into his plans.

"As for our guests and the hero, I would like to entrust our headquarters to you, and have you ready to take action more flexibly."

"Understood."

Reiji nodded back at Reanat's instructions without a single shred of doubt. On the other hand, Titania and Lefille were quietly grumbling as if they were resigning themselves. Reiji then leaned over and whispered to Suimei.

"Hey, Suimei. The two of them are acting like they get what the prince is saying, but they're acting weird. What's up with that?"

"Think about it. It's probably bad to let foreigners bag all the credit in a big battle. The Empire needs to do a lot of the legwork to keep troop morale up. So since we have Tia and Lefille, who are both experienced in war... We're a bit of a difficult group to handle."

"Aah..."

"If the Imperial Army can snag the first victory of the battle, depending on how things go, they'll either have us jump in or just reserve us for the decisive battle to come."

In the battlefields all throughout history, the first strike and the first victory were of utmost importance. If a foreign commander like Titania were the one to take them here, all recognition for the battle would go to her. And that would be no small slight to the militant Empire. For the same reasons, they wanted to avoid relying too heavily on either Reiji or Lefille. It made more sense to keep them at the base and only deploy them when necessary.

"Wow, politics in war is a real pain, huh?"

"Seriously."

"And we've kind of served our purpose already just by getting the other countries involved, haven't we?"

"For the most part. Well, since you're a hero, they're probably also expecting great things from you in the decisive battle."

That said, Reiji was indeed correct in that most of their role had already been fulfilled. If the battle went well enough from here, they might not even see combat at all. That was both the advantage and disadvantage of having a reputation. Just by being there, the Empire could advertise their presence for morale or blame things on them if the battle went poorly.

As the talks about plans for Suimei and Reiji's group came to an end, the council went on to discuss the detailed roles allotted to each of the Empire's officers. Up until now, they had been all listening quietly, but now that potential glory and achievements were on the line, they were quarrelling over who got to take on the more dangerous duties. So-and-so's men were the most resolute. So-and-so would never look back in the face of adversity. So-and-so was the most loyal to the country. Many such claims were being shouted across the table.

As that dispute began to wane towards its end, the entrance to the tent suddenly flipped open and a large robed man stepped inside.

After saluting, he removed his hood to reveal the face of an elderly man. His white hair, drooping cheeks, many wrinkles, and tired expression betrayed his years, but he had a piercing glint in his eyes. His spirit more than made up for his age; he gave off a strong, if not somewhat curious, impression. He took a knee and bowed before the prince, who then called out to him.

“Gorgan. Is something the matter?”

“First, allow me to apologize to both of Your Highnesses for interrupting you in the middle of the war council. I beg for forgiveness from each of the gathered generals as well.”

With that, the old man once more bowed down deeply. Though he replied to Reanat’s question with an apology, there was no humility in his tone. He sounded as though he believed himself equal to all those he addressed, including the prince. From his speech and behavior, Suimei could tell that this old man was crafty. He was likely one of the officers of the Empire—a mage of high social status. As Suimei scrutinized him, Liliana whispered in his ear in a quiet voice.

“That man... is Gorgan Bartwood Goalt, one of the Empire’s... Elite Twelve.”

“Which means...”

He was probably Liliana’s former superior. Since this was a battle that potentially carried the Empire’s future on its shoulders, it was inevitable that the Elite Twelve would show up. After Gorgan finished apologizing, Reanat questioned him once more.

“So?”

“I have come here on this occasion to make a humble request of Your Highness.”

“Oh? Have you? That is quite the unusual event.”

Reanat raised his eyelids like he was indeed surprised at this proclamation, and then Gorgan’s gaze shifted to Suimei’s group.

“Is something the matter? Does this concern Hero-dono and his companions?”

“I have heard that they will be taking part in the upcoming battle.”

“That is so, but what of it?”

“If I may speak plainly, I am dissatisfied.”

“Dissatisfied? You’re dissatisfied that a hero would fight among us?”

As Reanat turned a critical eye on him, Gorgan continued with an expression like he was feigning ignorance.

“If it is something that has already been decided, then we have no intention of objecting. However, there are those in his party who are lacking, and as such, there are those in the Elite Twelve who cannot consent to their participation.”

“It is not like they all will have the authority to give commands, and they will not be giving any of you direct orders either. Despite all that, do you still not consent?”

“It is not an issue of leadership potential, Your Highness.”

Gorgan promptly shot down Reanat’s assumption. Unable to clearly see what the older man was getting at, Reanat narrowed his eyes. Figuring it out first, Graziella snorted.

“Hmph. In short, it comes down to whether they are worthy enough to stand alongside you lot.”

When she cut right to the heart of the matter, Gorgan nodded in reply. The first to react to this was Titania.

“Old man, are you saying that you are dissatisfied with either myself or the Hero of Salvation, Reiji-sama?”

That was beyond the limits of what Titania would stand for. In a complete change from her usual elegant tone, she spoke severely with all the privilege and authority of her high standing. The atmosphere in the tent quickly tensed. But that was nothing compared to her fiery gaze that implied she was ready to cut Gorgan down at any moment.

Things were getting heated enough that the staff officers and generals in the tent were beginning to sweat a little. Titania was an expert swordswoman known as the Twilight Beheading Princess. And it certainly seemed like a befitting title with the way she looked right now. But even under such intense pressure, Gorgan still appeared completely composed and replied with an unchanging attitude.

“No, I do not doubt the abilities of the hero or Your Royal Highness Titania, who is extolled as the Twilight Beheading Princess. I have no complaints about either of you. However, regarding your companions... just how many among them could be said to be adequate?”

Gorgan didn’t point out anybody specifically, but his comments were likely directed at Suimei, Io Kuzami, and Liliana. He’d indirectly said so by only mentioning Reiji and Titania in his list of exceptions. But such obliqueness only disgusted Titania more. Despite this, it was Graziella who spoke up next.

“Gorgan, I’ll have you know that the companions of the Hero of Salvation and Her Royal Highness Titania are all people I personally brought along. Knowing that, would you still say you’re dissatisfied?”

“With all due respect.”

“You damned geezer.”

After Graziella glared at the stubborn Gorgan for a while, she spat out an insult. This time it was Graziella’s attendants and several of the generals who were brimming with rage as the atmosphere in the tent grew tense.

Even if someone had a problem with what the royals were doing,

it was common courtesy and decorum to keep it to oneself. But the problem here was a matter of influence. With someone of Gorgan's status bringing a problem before the war council—even if it was in regards to the hero's companions—it couldn't simply be overlooked. A considerable amount of displeasure would be born, and that would affect morale. It was an unpleasant situation all around for those in charge. As long as the concern was even remotely valid, it would need to be addressed or it might cast a shadow over the entire battle.

As with Gorgan sticking to his guns, he was practically taking the morale of the army hostage. Because he himself was an important figure in the army as well, he couldn't be punished outright without consequences on morale either. Graziella may have done so anyway, but the current supreme commander was Reanat.

In the building icy atmosphere, Gorgan once more spoke up.

"I have no concerns regarding Hero Reiji, Her Royal Highness Titania, or the esteemed White Flame."

"Then you mean you doubt the quality of everyone else?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The Elite Twelve is concerned about Liliana Zandyke and the guests from another world."

Lefille was not among those mentioned by Gorgan. Perhaps, just like Reanat, he had not even recognized her in her current form. But hearing all this, Io Kuzami narrowed her eyes like she'd just heard a very distasteful, unfunny joke.

"Oh? Are you saying that you doubt my true strength? You've got quite some nerve. It's impressive prattle coming from a mere gathering of withered branches pretending to be a tree."

Hearing Io Kuzami's arrogant manner of speaking, Gorgan's eyebrows arched furiously.

"Watch your mouth, little girl."

"That's my line. Are you not the one who should be watching your mouth, bastard? Or have you grown so old and senile that you've forgotten the importance of minding your words?"

Gorgan silently glared back at Io Kuzami's harsh words. He likely judged that any further argument would be fruitless. But, eventually brushing her off, he turned to Liliana.

"I do believe that you already know of Liliana's capabilities, don't you, bastard?"

"There are her previous achievements as part of the Elite Twelve and her role in resolving the incident in the capital to consider, but in the end, she is still lacking. The Elite Twelve would also call her nature into question."

"So you cannot put your trust into one who is lacking?"

"It is not just us of the Elite Twelve; I believe each of the generals and soldiers must also think so. I do believe her reputation was

influenced quite favorably by the incident in the capitol, but there are also those of us who have lingering questions.”

So he said, but Liliana didn't seem to have any intention of making a careless remark. She simply kept quiet and listened. And as Gorgan's complaints about Liliana came to an end, his sunken eyes then shifted over to Suimei.

“And then there's me.”

Gorgan didn't seem to have much in particular to say. He simply gave a grave nod.

“And so, Gorgan, what is it that you wish to do?” asked Reanat.

“I would like you to let us test these three people.”

“By test... you mean...?”

Gorgan looked up at the prince shamelessly.

“Let's see... How about we have matches between them and three members of the Elite Twelve?”

“I understand your request, however, I do not understand what all of you have to gain from this. Surely you must know that even if you refuse to recognize their capabilities, I will not be withdrawing them from the battle. Our enemies are demons. Each and every single human ally present is a boon to our cause.”

“Of course we will accept Your Highness's will to include them in the battle. However, we still believe it necessary to test them.”

“In other words, you wish to demonstrate the Elite Twelve's dignity. Is that it?”

Reanat at last came to an understanding of Gorgan's intentions. It wasn't something as honorable as having the outsiders demonstrate their abilities to dispel any doubt about them on the battlefield. No, that could have been the case, but based on the implication of the conversation, Gorgan intended to use these matches to demonstrate the authority of the Elite Twelve. It would be bad to try and make an example out of the hero, but his companions were a different story. Defeating any one of them would be another notch in the belt of the Elite Twelve.

It was perfectly transparent that they were expecting to use the brightness of the star known as the hero to make their own shine brighter. But as the conversation moved towards whether this was actually going to happen or not, and Suimei let out a perturbed sigh.

“What a pain in the ass.”

He spat out his honest opinion without any attempt to hide his annoyance at this gross inconvenience. But this was all old news to Suimei. There were people like this even in the world he was from. And it wasn't even limited to magicians. People with great powers often became arrogant and high on themselves. They challenged anyone who would tread on their glory, and forced fights to firmly

establish their self-perceived hierarchy. It was so uncivilized that the Thousand Nights Association served as a mediator in such conflicts, but there was no authority like that here.

Gorgan seemed to take Suimei's idle complaint as arrogance and turned his glare on him accordingly. However, after having competed with so many magicians before, Suimei was already accustomed to handling such tension and bided his time without further rocking the boat. Fully intent on making his stance perfectly clear, Gorgan snorted derisively and looked away.

When he did, Suimei casually got a good look at the guy. Just based on looks, he was an old man with a large build. He wore a moss green robe and appeared to be an experienced mage. And not just with Elemental magic. He'd stuck his hands recklessly in all sorts of mysteries. The evidence showed all over his body, which couldn't bear the burden of his rash experimenting.

His eyes were clouded, and the tips of his fingers looked withered and yellowed like dying plants. It was easy to guess his insides hadn't fared much better. In contrast to his robust appearance, his body was tattered from overuse. But the glimpse of uncommon ferociousness Suimei caught within all that was a sign of his tenaciousness as a man who pursued the mysteries. The greedy light he could see in the old man's eyes was an insatiable hunger for them.

It wasn't like Suimei couldn't sympathize with that, but seeing the state his body was in, he thought Io Kuzami's assessment was quite right. He did indeed give the impression of a bundle of withered branches pretending to be a tree.

As for Io Kuzami, she was the first to grant Gorgan's wish for a match.

"I do not mind. I shall destroy and scatter those who would make light of me. Isn't it a wonderful idea? The Japanese adore such showdowns."

"I also... do not mind."

Liliana agreed as well. She was not timid in the least about it, either. Perhaps this newfound confidence came from the mysteries she herself had touched upon. And the last to reply in a rather languid manner, of course, was Suimei.

"Whatever. I'll do it."

With the other two agreeing, he'd lost his chance to back out. While lamenting the fact that he kept getting caught in the flow of things recently, Suimei let out a resigned sigh.



Right after Reanat acknowledged Gorgan's request, the war council in the large tent came to an end. As for the matches that had

been decided on, things were scheduled to get started immediately after the preparations were complete. Said preparations were mostly limited to having the earth attribute specialists around camp create a makeshift arena out of stone, so it wouldn't be long before things got underway. As Suimei walked around and gazed up at the endless sky, Reiji—who was walking next to him—smiled bitterly.

“This sure got weird, huh?”

“Seriously. They want to test us? They're just arbitrarily pissy. Normally that kinda thing makes them hard to handle and leads to a demotion. Don't they know what it means to be a member of an organization?”

Suimei vented his frustrations rather furiously. Because he himself was a member of an organization, he was especially critical of Gorgan's behavior. Unable to shake his irritation entirely, Suimei just groaned quietly to himself. Seeing the whole thing as silly, Reiji explained his opinion on the matter.

“He must be so strong that he just can't do that... Or, really, I guess all of them probably are.”

“Ugh, it's a perfect example of an abuse of power. Being so hung up on your authority that you feel the need to demonstrate it this way is seriously idiotic. And crappy.”

“Ah, so you also noticed that he's using us?”

“Well, yeah. No matter how you put it, his selfishness was completely obvious.”

“Thought so.”

“There's safety in silence. In the end, the fact that they basically told us that they want us to be human sacrifices on the altar of their glory is just shitty.”

As Suimei looked over as he ranted, he caught a glimpse of a serious face he'd been seeing on Reiji more and more as of late.

“Hey, Suimei, do you think it'll be okay?”

“Hmm? The match? I should be fine. I'll show you how tough I am.”

“I'm not particularly worried about you, Suimei. I know you're not the type to say you can do something when it's really out of your league. So I'm sure you're plenty tough for this.”

“Then what is it?”

“The one I'm worried about is Mizuki... Or Io Kuzami.”

“Ah, *her*,” Suimei said without thinking when he heard that name.

Reiji then made a sour expression like he'd just eaten something extremely bitter.

“That's... probably not okay, huh? She was pretty motivated, wasn't she? I can only imagine what she's gonna do...”

“Yeah...”

Reiji's gloomy sigh spread and dissipated into the ether. He was likely imagining what havoc Io Kuzami was going to wreak during the match. If Io Kuzami was the revival of Mizuki's old self like Reiji suspected, he wouldn't be able to stop the train wreck that she would cause. And there would undoubtedly be a train wreck. Suimei cleared his throat and did a few vocal exercises like he was preparing for an impression. And then, he thrust out his finger and covered his left eye with his left hand.

"FUHAHAHAHAHA! Hear me, oh tiny existences who have run rampant across this world, you homo sapiens known as humans! What will unfold before you is my brilliant banquet! You bastards who are my invitees shall all catch a glimpse of my ultimate power—True Darkness! Or something like that."

"You're unsurprisingly good at that. But I can totally see that happening, yeah..."

"I'm not taking that as a compliment."

"In any case, we should also be careful."

"And what good is that gonna do?"

"At the very least, I think we can avoid being dragged in."

Though he said that, Reiji didn't seem particularly confident about it. That was just how much he saw Io Kuzami as a walking disaster. As he lingered on those heavy feelings, Reiji suddenly shifted his gaze towards something else.

"Anyways, what is that?"

"Hmm?"

Following Reiji's gaze, Suimei spotted none other than Io Kuzami. But she wasn't alone. She seemed to be talking to someone. Worried that she had already gotten herself into something, they stealthily approached and realized it was Lefille that was with her.

Interested in this odd combination, they drew even closer with silent footsteps. Looking closely, they could see something like pompoms in Lefille's hands. And when they listened in, it sounded like Lefille was just as confused as they were.

"So, why am I holding these things?"

"Hmph. Because only you are denied the opportunity to stand on the stage of battle—denied the opportunity to unleash your own pathos! As such, it has been decided that you will take on cheering activities for myself and those who are standing by for their own duels. I have just decided upon it. And any proper cheering uses such tools."

Hearing what Io Kuzami said, Suimei and Reiji both looked like they couldn't believe what was unfolding right in front of them. They both placed a hand on their brows, closed their eyes, and shook their heads. Though they had just decided they'd be careful, the god of this

world truly had no such mercy on them.

“So, you’re saying I should cheer you on?”

“That’s right.”

“Just me?”

“That’s how it is. This is also befitting of my disciple, but this time she has been chosen to be a participant.”

“If it’s about not participating, then what about Her Highness Titania?”

“No, that one will not do.”

“Why?”

Io Kuzami then gazed off into the distance like she was recalling a longtime rival and then fed Lefille a lie.

“Titania Root Astel. She is the owner of a glacial heart colder than one looking for employment during the ice age of the 1994 recession. A wolf wearing the woolly hide of tenderness that she shows to everyone. I have no ears to listen to her.”

“I don’t really understand your expression... but you mean to say that Her Highness is unsuitable for the task.”

“Indeed.”

As Suimei was wondering just what had gotten into Io Kuzami’s head this time—and how she could be so casual about it—Lefille stuck out the pompoms.

“So, what are these?”

“Those are the sacred treasures used for cheering, pompoms. The one who is cheering raises them to the sky and must shout ‘rah, rah, rah’ followed by a name.”

“Oh? R-Rah, rah, rah, Suimei-kun! Is that about right?”

Despite being completely bewildered, Lefille played along and began moving the pompoms. However, Io Kuzami seemed unable to stomach the way she was swinging them around.

“Be more cheerful! And move your hands more vigorously! If you don’t, then the mysteries behind the sacred treasures will never work!”

“L-Like this, then? Rah, rah, rah!”

“Wrong! More like this! Give it passion and soul! Shout out with your ultrasoul!”

Matching Io Kuzami, Lefille began to absurdly swing around the pompoms and shout.

“What... is that?”

“Lefi-san, you don’t have to amuse her, you know? You could just knock her senseless.”

Suimei was speaking in such a quiet voice that there was no way Lefille would ever hear him. But as this was unfolding, Titania—who incidentally happened to be nearby—walked up behind Suimei and

Reiji. She was also mesmerized by what was happening.

“Rather, is it not about time that we must do something about that child?”

“I know, right?”

“You’re telling me...”

Both boys replied with a heavy sigh, one atop the other. It wasn’t long after that that they were informed the arena was ready.



Currently, Aerith Melfein of the Empire’s Elite Twelve was encircled by a crowd of soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder without any hint of a gap between them. She was completely surrounded. But it wasn’t just her, you see. For standing with her inside that encirclement was another—at least former—member of the Elite Twelve.

Saying that they were encircled made the situation sound dire. But rather than being surrounded by enemies, they were surrounded by an audience. The soldiers that had gathered around the roughly-hewn impromptu stone arena had come to witness the match they were about to have.

This had all been orchestrated by the head of the Elite Twelve, Gorgan, as a way of demonstrating the Empire’s strength over the foreign interlopers that had been brought in to assist with the battle at hand—the hero of Astel, Astel’s Twilight Beheading Princess, and their companions. He claimed it was to prove their worth, or lack thereof, in the upcoming fight with the demons, but that was pure pretense. Each of the companions in question would be fighting in a match against one of the Elite Twelve, and Aerith had been chosen as first up for the Empire.

Though Aerith held a prestigious position as part of the Elite Twelve, she’d begun life as a humble farmer’s daughter from a small village in the south of the Empire. The village was always in need of labor, so her older brother and sister, as well as her younger brother and sister, all made a living working right there in their hometown. Aerith herself had assisted her mother and father alongside her siblings until she was an adult. She’d always thought that, just like all the other young girls in town, she would marry a local man and continue to support her family and the village until she died. That was the expected life of farmer’s daughter, after all.

But that expected life took a turn for the unexpected when mages from the Magic Institute appeared in town. At the time, the emperor was pressed to strengthen the military and had sent scouts far and wide throughout the Empire to recruit anyone with a talent for magic. What they were looking for was extremely simple—it was purely a

matter of whether or not one had grounding and potential. The Magic Institute gathered all of the men and women in the center of town and began taking their measurements. When they did, they learned that Aerith had a strong disposition for magic.

And the rest was history. In exchange for a hefty salary, Aerith was invited to the imperial capital, became one of its mages, and was eventually inducted into the Elite Twelve. She'd advanced in great strides, but each step of her journey was hard fought and well earned. To become an imperial mage, she first had to attend the Magic Institute. But because she was a bumpkin from the country and her skin was swarthy like wheat, she'd spent her days there under the constant, unceasing ridicule of her peers. Despite their harassment, however, Aerith continued to study magic without giving up and eventually rose above them all. When it was determined that she was fit to take part in actual combat, she then went on to distinguish herself on the battlefield.

As a result, she was singled out by royalty and was eventually selected to join the Elite Twelve—the youngest ever at the time. To Aerith, there was no higher honor that she could think of. She'd far outclassed her tormentors at the Magic Institute, those selfish fools who were so proud of their birth and inborn talent. She'd surpassed them all with hard work and steady effort. She took great pride in that, and it was the basis of her self-confidence. After all, she was the quick-witted, hard-working girl who was the youngest member ever to be inducted into the Elite Twelve. That was Aerith's reputation. Or at least it had been several years ago.

Since then, she'd been eclipsed by Liliana Zandyke, the adopted daughter of another member of the Elite Twelve, Rogue Zandyke. She wielded a rare Elemental power that defied and defiled the light—the attribute of darkness. She'd broken Aerith's record before the age of five. If Aerith had taken great strides to reach her place as part of the Elite Twelve, then Liliana had done it all in one immense leap. After several examinations under the sponsorship of Rogue Zandyke, Liliana was inducted into the Elite Twelve without ever setting foot on the battlefield, let alone enrolling in the Magic Institute.

There was no way Aerith wouldn't be discontent about this development. Liliana was also from a village in the sticks, but just because she'd been discovered by a member of the Elite Twelve, she'd been awarded a position that Aerith had had to work and fight for. On top of that, she'd stolen Aerith's title as the youngest ever to join the Elite Twelve. Though she never let it show, that resentment was still eating away at the depths of her heart.

And as Liliana accomplished her missions and amassed achievements one after another, Aerith's hostility for her only grew

stronger. They would cross paths every now and then on missions, but just the sight of Liliana was enough to irritate Aerith. Needless to say, she was especially displeased that Liliana would be taking part in the upcoming fight.

She'd entered the arena with that displeasure boiling over in her heart. This would be the grand stage where she herself would author Liliana Zandyke's defeat. She wanted this to be the end of the dark feelings plaguing her. And she wanted to prove once and for all who was really superior.

From the arena, she turned and looked at two people standing in the crowd. They were the two other contenders chosen to take part in the matches just like Aerith had.

"Now, now, Senpai. If you get too worked up, it'll affect the fight, won't it? You really okay out there?"

The one calling out to her—his voice like cold water on her boiling determination—was another member of the Elite Twelve, Slane Zolnuf. He was a young man who had only been inducted into the Elite Twelve fairly recently. Though he was older than Aerith, he was still her junior. He was sharp but boastful, and always conducted in himself in a way that belittled and made light of others. Because of that, Aerith didn't care much for him. The Elite Twelve were supposed to be noble emissaries of the Empire's power, after all.

"Aerith, put the utmost of your power on display so that you do not bring shame upon the Elite Twelve—not that a plebeian like you would ever bring us any real honor."

Following Slane, a man in his prime called out to her. With his pompous tone, every single word that came out of his mouth betrayed him as a typical disgusting noble. His name was Baaldan Dostolf Zegent. He'd joined the ranks of the Elite Twelve by using his influence to seize an opening while they were short a member—and he was only disputably fit for the position. His power as a mage was certain, but his power was not accompanied by good technique or other notable abilities. However, because he displayed a matchless talent for trickery, he'd managed to keep his place. In an entirely different way from Slane, he was also a nasty man.

In any day, age, and world, it was quite common for powerful mages to be eccentrics, but the current Elite Twelve were worse than that. They'd gone beyond eccentric; they were just plain despicable. To Aerith, the only upright members of the lot were probably Graziella and Gorgan. But in her eyes, worse than even Slane and Baaldan was Liliana. She had never deserved to call herself part of the Elite Twelve. She was but a lowly mage who'd capitalized on her father's fame.

The Elite Twelve are not so naive...

Aerith could no longer stand for those who relied on their parents' influence or those who had no real talent to swagger around in a charade of importance. She would stake her pride as someone who'd worked for her place in life to knock them down a peg.

Just before she'd entered the arena, the member of the current Elite Twelve that she respected most aside from Graziella had pulled her aside for a word. It was Gorgan Bartwood Goalt, the head of the group.

"Aerith, you do understand the situation at hand, correct? Just because she is a former associate and younger than you does not mean that you can hold back. The honor of the Elite Twelve is what you are fighting for here."

"Yes, commander. I understand fully. I will use my water magic to demonstrate to that foolish little girl just what it means to walk away from the Elite Twelve."

Aerith had looked Gorgan dead in the eye as she made that declaration before bowing her head, and Gorgan had nodded back to her in satisfaction. After that, she'd entered the arena where Liliana was already waiting.

"To think that someone who ran away would shamelessly return like this... Does this mean you've changed your mind and want to rejoin the Elite Twelve?"

"I did not come back here... because I wanted to come back... to the Elite Twelve. And besides, the only reason... I joined the Elite Twelve in the first place... was to support the colonel. I have no attachment... to the Elite Twelve... without him."

"How impudent. You're probably using this fight to force Reanat-sama and Graziella-sama to acknowledge you. Despite being a child, you're quite shrewd."

"..."

Though Aerith was showering her with abuse, Liliana's expression never wavered. But that was just the kind of girl she was. Despite being a child, she was hardly childish. Even when insulted, she didn't get mad—she didn't even get sad. It was like she was saying that such provocation rolled completely off her shoulders. And that was what got on Aerith's nerves. No, everything about her got on Aerith's nerves.

"I will show you the kind of power a real member of the Elite Twelve possesses."

"Please... by all means."

At that, both girls took fighting stances. There was no referee to call the beginning of the match. This was a fight to demonstrate the authority of the Elite Twelve. They fully intended on delivering such a definitive defeat to these outsiders that there would be no disputing it.

As such, Aerith was planning on settling things in an instant. If she won the fight right out of the gate, that would be the most overwhelming victory possible—a victory worthy of the Elite Twelve.

“Oh Water. Thou shalt gather and burst forth as a mighty geyser. Surpass the strongest gale and pierce mine enemy.”

Aerith began incanting her spell. Her talent for magic—as the mages who’d come to her village had discovered—was an extreme affinity for the water attribute. Indeed, Aerith could not use any attribute *except* for water. She was the only member of the Elite Twelve restricted to a single attribute, but her gift for that attribute made her far more powerful and precise with it than anyone else. That was what had earned her her place as part of the Elite Twelve.

“Go, Rapid Aqua Bullet!”

Holding out her hand and pointing at Liliana, she activated her keywords. The moment she did, a large current of water formed at her fingertip and began to swirl like a whirlpool before it shot forward. It was so fast that it could hardly be followed with the naked eye. Moreover, Liliana was working with only one eye, meaning she naturally had a rather large blind spot. All in all, it was an extremely practical attack to use against her. However, Liliana evaded the blindingly fast water bullet as if she’d seen it coming miles away.

“Wha—?!”

All Liliana had done was hop once like a wild rabbit. That was all she’d had to do to dodge the bullet that then proceeded to fly into the outer boundary of the arena and disperse.

It was an attack that should have been inescapable. Yet Liliana had sidestepped it as if it were a mere nuisance. Perhaps that would have been possible if she knew the spell, but Aerith had never once used it in front of her. Nevertheless, there was no denying what she’d just seen with her own eyes. Liliana had successfully dodged it.

It was startling, but Aerith quickly collected herself. If Liliana could evade her attacks, that meant she at least had a modicum of skill. It wasn’t what Aerith had expected, but that just meant there was a small discrepancy between her predictions and reality. If she adjusted for that miscalculation, then Liliana had absolutely no chance of winning.

“Oh Water! Thou shalt gather and burst forth as a mighty mass of geysers! Surpass the strongest gale and pierce mine enemy! Rapid Aqua Bullets!”

Aerith settled on trying the same spell again, except this time she summoned multiple bullets at her fingertips instead of one. She aimed all five at Liliana and fired them one after the other. She wagered that, with Liliana taking evasive action, she wouldn’t be able to keep up and the last bullet would successfully take her out. However...

“Is that... all?”

All five of the water bullets flew right past Liliana. Even though there was no way she could have seen their trajectories, she simply sidestepped them as if she were dodging harmless pebbles thrown by a small child.

“Tch, don’t look down on me!” Aerith shouted, roiling over Liliana’s provocative question and attitude.

And just as she was preparing to use her next spell, Liliana’s mana became highly excited. It seeped out from her, soaking the atmosphere and prickling at Aerith’s skin like a volatile acid in the air. This was Liliana’s signature manifestation of mana.

“Then... it’s about time... that I start... Oh Hermit. Hidden in the threshold to the realm of the dead, oh servant of shadows. From the abyss, raise your innocent voice that causes all creation to quiver and tremble.”

Liliana began incanting a strange spell. As she wove her chant that hailed something—but not an Element—a black magic circle appeared at her feet. Following that, a multitude of black holes began appearing around her like invisible worms were eating away at the air itself. Aerith guessed that this was Liliana’s specialty, magic of the darkness attribute. Raw darkness was bubbling up to the surface, vanishing, and bubbling up once more. Every time this cycle repeated, the number of bubbles appearing increased.

Magic of the darkness attribute did not directly attack a target. Instead, it was magic that affected a target’s mind. It could render someone panicked or comatose, and it was even possible to use such magic for defense. There were many techniques of the darkness attribute that were altogether eerie or disturbing.

While the dark bubbles around Liliana continued increasing, Aerith found herself starkly reluctant to do anything. Faced with the impending danger of dark magic, alarm bells were ringing in the back of her head. As she stood there trying to decide whether to go on the offensive or defensive, the air right before her eyes began to fester as the darkness encroached on it. As if the air itself was slowly being wrenched, it coiled into a vortex. She started to see an asymmetrical transparent pattern in front of her like she was observing the world through warped glass.

Eventually, a pallid light appeared at the center of the pattern. The transparent and warped space around it then gradually took on a pale blue hue. Aerith had no idea what was happening, and she had no idea what would happen next. She’d never seen such magic before—not at the Magic Institute, and not in all her days on the battlefield.

As Aerith finally made up her mind and began boldly chanting a defensive spell, something appeared beyond the pallid light, bubbling

darkness, and twisted space—a beast. Judging by its silhouette, it was a dog. But its body was aglow with the ghostly pallid light, it had pitch black eye sockets that looked like they could suck in souls, and its entire body was easily Liliana’s height. After the beast manifested fully, Liliana walked up beside it and affectionately patted its head.

“From now on... your name is... Howler.”

The moment Liliana bestowed a name upon the beast born of darkness and will-o’-the-wisps, a bright red light filled its murky eye sockets. The next instant, the beast named Howler raised a magnificent howling cry that shook heaven and earth. The sound of it—which felt like an electric shock in the air—rang through the entire arena. No, the entire encampment. But for all its power and volume, it seemed to carry with it no sense of menace.

“I don’t know what kind of magic that is, but magic that creates a mere beast couldn’t possibly...”

Aerith then quietly chanted a spell of her own and prepared to fire a water bullet at the dog. It was sitting perfectly still, as if waiting for orders from its master. In other words, it was a sitting duck. Without wasting a moment, Aerith let her bullet fly as soon as it was ready. It sailed through the air faster than the mana light of the spell could be reflected in the audience’s eyes and, kicking up dust and a surging spray in its wake, it pierced right into Howler.

“Did you see that— Huh?”

Or so Aerith thought it would. Preemptively raising a triumphant boast, her tone quickly changed when she realized what had happened. Howler hadn’t made a single noise, and he was still standing right where he had been before. He hadn’t moved a muscle; he hadn’t had to. Right before the bullet was about to strike him, it had completely vanished like it was negated by some unseen force.

Magic, however, was not something that could simply be negated by other magic. When conflicting attributes clashed against each other, it was no quiet affair. Especially not when spells were colliding directly. The water bullet should have had *some* sort of effect on the dog. But that wasn’t the case; it had simply vanished into nothingness. This also seemed to surprise Liliana somewhat, as she squinted her eye and looked at Howler pensively.

“So this... is rank disparity extinction.”

Aerith didn’t understand this phenomenon, but she didn’t currently have the leisure to contemplate it.

“If my water bullets won’t work, then...”

“No, it’s still... my turn. Go, Howler!”

At Liliana’s order, the dog sprang to life. It jumped high into the air over the arena and then dove at Aerith. Its lightning speed and predatory movements were just like that of a wild beast. No, they *were*

that of a wild beast. But even if she was no longer up against a human opponent, Aerith wouldn't lose her composure so easily. This was not her first fight by any stretch of the imagination. If that was all it took to shake her, she never would have made it as part of the Elite Twelve. She stood firm even as Howler came charging at her, moving erratically to the left and right.

"Oh Water. In accordance with my thoughts, become lithe and tough. Extend from my fingertips as a blade to cut apart all matter. Liquid Blade!"

Aerith fired off another spell—naturally, one of the water attribute. A flowing blade of water extended from her hand, lashing about like a whip as it snaked its way through the air towards Howler. Unlike the water bullet before, Howler took decisive evasive action this time. While dodging the blade of water that cut down all else in its path, Howler retreated enough to gain some distance from Aerith. He moved back behind Liliana, positioning her between them.

"Tch, squirming around like that... Try this on for size!" With a shout, Aerith poured all her might into her next chant. "Oh Water. Grow great and swirl around me in a gyre. Swallow everything inside your calamity. Bestow pain upon all you touch and smother my enemies within your embrace! Hydro Abyss Sphere!"

The moment she activated her keywords, water surged forth from the ground at her feet at an alarming rate. She could hear the surprised voices of the soldiers and the worried voices of the mages maintaining the barricade as continued to pour out. It flooded the entire arena and began to swirl with Aerith at its center. She was unaffected by the spell, but the hastening whirlpool submerged any and all foes that stood before her.

It was a merciless attack. But since she was told to show no mercy, she didn't care whether her opponent lived or died. No, that was a lie. The most satisfactory result of all would be victory by fatality. A dark smile rose up on her lips as she concentrated on her spell. But then she heard something.

It was Howler's voice. And it was growing louder.

The sound that rose up towards the heavens was like a roar, but there was no single word to properly describe it. Had it been from a dog or wolf, it would have been a howl. But this was different. It was as if the pallid beast was ejecting raw thunder from its maw. If someone had told her this was the fabled beast she'd heard of as a child that caused all earthquakes, she would have believed them without a doubt. The power of its thunderous roaring howl was just that tremendous. It shook the very air, blowing away the whirlpool and even the barricades of the arena around it.

"Impossible!"

Aerith couldn't help but exclaim upon witnessing this unbelievable spectacle. The soldiers and mages in the crowd gasped as well. Even the other members of the Elite Twelve raised voices of surprise in unison.

The beast born of darkness should have only been able to attack with darkness. Yet it had used some unknown power to counter Aerith's magic. Spells were supposed to behave in predictable, predetermined ways. There was no way a summoned beast should suddenly be able to gain a new power in the middle of combat. But Aerith had just seen it happen. Letting out a low growl, Howler now locked eyes with her. It was indeed truly a dark beast.

While she was focused on Howler, Aerith suddenly heard light footsteps behind her. Liliana Zandyke was closing in.

Crap...

That was all Aerith could think. Liliana was the daughter of a swordsman extolled throughout the Empire: the Sword Master of the Lonely Shadow, Rogue Zandyke. Aerith had heard that she was not only a capable mage, but that she knew her way around a blade. It was dangerous to let her get too close, even if she was empty-handed. Aerith clicked her tongue at the thought, but Liliana was closing in surprisingly quickly. And she was muttering.

"My hand is the fetter entrusted with dark desire. Engrave my sinister touch upon the hearts of those who stand before me and chill them with despair... Negative Touch."

The moment Liliana finished her chant, a pallid blue light identical to Howler's began pouring forth from her gloved right hand. It looked just like the otherworldly luminescence spotted in graveyards at night sometimes—the light of lingering spirits.

Liliana's glowing hand swept towards Aerith. She'd been slow to take evasive maneuvers, and Liliana's hand grazed her arm. But the next thing that caught her attention was the growling of a dog coming from behind her. The moment she heard it, she abandoned all appearances and dove for the ground. All she cared about in that moment was avoiding Howler. As she rolled along the arena floor, Howler's jaws snapped the air where she'd just been standing.

If she hadn't listened to her instincts, she would've been dog food. Cold sweat trickled down her spine as she got back to her feet, but it seemed she wasn't out of the woods just yet.

"U-Urgh... Wh-What is this?"

Aerith suddenly discovered she was no longer able to raise her arm. She immediately looked down at it. There wasn't any sign of injury, yet for some reason, it just wouldn't move the way she wanted it to. It was sapped by a sluggish feeling like she'd just woken up, but the sensation was limited to just her arm.

It was, of course, the arm that Liliana had grazed. It must have been the effect of her ghostly glowing magic. Aerith ground her teeth as she came to that conclusion, but Liliana spoke up before she could do anything about it.

“What’s... the matter? Despite being so eager... aren’t you a little too... unprepared? Weren’t you going to show me... the power of a real member... of the Elite Twelve?”

“Urgh! You bitch!”

Hearing Liliana taunt her just as she’d put two and two together—almost like she’d timed the whole thing—Aerith couldn’t take it anymore. Hearing her own words turned against her only made it worse. She was incensed, and Liliana looked at her like she knew exactly what she was doing.

“To be so easily riled up... As a member of the Elite Twelve, what... do you have to say for yourself? The mere provocation of a child... Shouldn’t you just be able to ignore it? Or is this because... it was me saying it? That’s just how much... you can’t stand me. That’s it... isn’t it? You’re just... that kind of person after all.”

“Silence! Shut that mouth of yours immediately!”

“You care for yourself... too much. That’s why... you aren’t suited to fight... opponents that close in on you. They pose a threat... to your own precious self... Am I wrong?”

“Don’t act like you know everything! I... I hate that part of you!”

“I also... know that. You don’t have to go shouting it... after all this time, do you?”

“SHUT UUUUUUUUP!”

Aerith let her boiling hatred for Liliana explode. A mage should never lose their composure. If they did, how would they ever be able to control their magic? Learning to keep calm at all times was a basic part of any mage’s training. That included Aerith’s. But in that moment, she just couldn’t contain her rage. Not only was she personally being insulted, but Liliana dared to mock the Elite Twelve. It was a gross offense beyond the limits of what Aerith could stand.

However, just howling in rage would do nothing to change the situation. She had to do something. Yet if she relied on pure emotion to put together a spell right now, such an unfocused attempt at magic would never have any effect on Howler—let alone Liliana. And even if she started on a longer chant to collect herself, Howler would never let her finish it.

In front of her was Liliana Zandyke. And behind her was the pallid beast. It was unfair. Utterly unfair. Those words gradually rose up in Aerith’s throat. Despite this being a one-on-one match, she was fighting two opponents. It was a cowardly tactic. There was no other way of describing it—it was outright cowardly. She wanted to call

Liliana out for it, but her pride as a member of the Elite Twelve kept her lips sealed. Yet though she'd said nothing, Liliana seemed to know exactly what she was thinking.

"I don't really mind... if Howler steps back... you know? I'll gladly dismiss him... if you say out loud... that you think... this is an unfair fight."

Without a modicum of consideration for Aerith's feelings, Liliana issued her that ultimatum. All she had to do to even the playing field was admit that she was at a disadvantage. All she had to do was whine and complain. All she had to do was drag the dignity of the Elite Twelve through the mud.

If the only issue was being outnumbered, Aerith wouldn't have been irritated. Her senses were sharp—so sharp that she'd even heard the shocked audience drop the fruits and other foods they were snacking on in surprise as the fight unfolded. She could have been surrounded by ten professional assassins, and she would have heard each and every one of them sneaking up on her. She'd never even feel threatened. But right now, her brain wasn't reacting properly to the little girl and pallid beast. She couldn't come up with a single defensive plan on the spot that held any water.

As she spun through ideas in her head, Liliana once more began murmuring a chant. Each and every word out of her mouth sounded like another insult to Aerith. Even when Liliana was casting a spell, it was like she was making fun of her. Aerith had to shut her up somehow.

Yes, all she had to do was seal that wretched little mouth. It was the root of everything that threatened her, both those terrible spells and those terrible taunting words. To put an end to it all, she'd stake everything on her next move. Fanning the flames of hatred in her heart, Aerith unleashed all of her mana.

But that mass of burning mana was quickly drowned out by a wave of something far more powerful that overcame it.

"He who is in our surroundings, the one that our eyes cannot see —"



Not long before Liliana dealt the decisive blow against Aerith...

Suimei, who was also scheduled to fight that day, was watching the current match with Felmenia. They were intentionally standing a bit apart from Reiji and the others so they could talk about Liliana's performance without being overheard.

Liliana had just summoned Howler. Felmenia watched with rapt attention, and then turned to Suimei with a puzzled expression.

"Is that... a familiar?"

“Yup. There’re a lot of familiars that take the form of animals, and that’s what you’re looking at—a familiar made out of a charm given form.”

Felmenia was unsure of this “charm” business, and the furrow in her brow deepened accordingly.

“Out of a charm, you say? She didn’t make it out of magicka?”

“Yeah, a charm. Saying she made it out of magicka... It’s not wrong, but it’s not exactly specific. That thing wasn’t formed by a spell, per se, but by the peculiar power of the words she used.”

“And that’s what you call a charm?”

While watching Aerith brandish her blade of water, Suimei nodded in response to Felmenia’s question. He then turned a challenging look on her.

“If it was you in there, how would you break through that?”

“How I would deal with Liliana’s familiar? Hmm, hmmm...”

An answer didn’t immediately surface in Felmenia’s mind, and she began groaning with a grim, pensive expression on her face. In the middle of this, someone called out to them from behind.

“Oh? White Flame-dono doesn’t know?”

When they turned towards the owner of the deep, charming voice, they saw a woman with golden hair dressed in a military uniform—Graziella Filas Rieseld. Having overheard Suimei’s question, she cut in with a faint smile on her lips like she knew the answer. Felmenia then replied in a somewhat surprised tone at her arrival.

“Does Your Imperial Highness know?”

“Well, yeah.”

“If it is alright with you, then might I ask you to explain?”

“I don’t particularly mind, but there’s not much meaning if you don’t offer Mr. Grumpypants here your own answer. I don’t think he’d be pleased if I spoil the fun, either.”

As for the one Graziella had called “Mr. Grumpypants”...

“I’m not some strict killjoy professor.”

“No? You weren’t keeping the answer on purpose? Isn’t this what you’d call... a dangling carrot?”

“It’s not a big deal if someone else explains the trick.”

“Isn’t it standard practice to dangle the carrot as long as possible?”

“If you think that’s my only carrot, you’re dead wrong. In my opinion, you should have as many as possible. In fact, calling them carrots is a bit stupid... But you get what I’m saying, right?”

“It’s an extravagant way of thinking, but for now I shall simply say that you’re not wrong.”

Graziella answered in a somewhat noncommittal manner. She likely didn’t want to agree with her rival too readily. But putting

Suimei aside, Felmenia was looking up at her with eager eyes. Taking the hint, Graziella began explaining.

“If you’re unable to come up with the answer, White Flame—dono, that means you’re thinking about it too hard. That thing you’re calling a familiar was created by Liliana Zandyke’s words. In essence, it’s a cluster of words. That is to say, in a manner of speaking, it works and fights based on the words she used to create it. Words are concepts we give voice to, and without them—let’s say, if they were stolen from her—that thing would no longer be able to take shape. Stealing concepts themselves is probably quite difficult, but in this case, it would suffice to steal away the foundation of those words—sound. How about that?”

Graziella looked expectantly at Suimei, who gave her answer a passing grade without any hesitation.

“Yeah, exactly. Strictly speaking, the answer is just to nullify sound in the area, but you could say that stealing sound is just a fancy way of doing that.”

Hearing Graziella’s explanation and Suimei’s summary, something finally clicked for Felmenia. When it did, she enthusiastically raised her hand.

“I also thought of something!”

“You mean... something other than what we just said?”

“Yes! If Liliana’s familiar is made of words, then using words with meanings that run contrary to hers—antonyms, if you will—might negate its existence! Right?”

After giving her answer, Felmenia waited for Suimei’s reply with bated breath. Graziella seemed to find Felmenia’s idea rather novel, and she smiled with an engaged look on her face.

“Oh? Antonyms, huh... In other words, using another chant to directly oppose the first, no?”

Felmenia nodded in response to Graziella’s interpretation. Suimei then did the same.

“That’s also an option. Using magicka with the opposite effect is a perfectly viable strategy.”

Upon hearing that, Felmenia struck a triumphant pose. She was delighted that she hadn’t fallen behind Graziella.

“Now you, Suimei Yakagi. If it were you, how would you handle it?”

“Me? I would’ve obstructed that magicka before it could be fully knit together, disassembled it, and used rebound air to make the caster eat their own words. Well, but that’s only if it took time to construct the spell like Liliana’s did.”

“Hmph. What is this ‘rebound air’?”

“It’s the fatal flaw of high-ranking magicka, or rather, the final

phase of magicka that takes multiple steps. Right before the spell manifests, if the primary factor of the spell's mysticism is obstructed, it will recoil back towards the caster."

"I have had my magic obstructed many times, but that has never happened. Do you really know what you're talking about?"

"Yeah, I do. It's not something that happens just because a chant gets interrupted. Unless there's an effect on the spell itself while it's being constructed, then no dice. How should I put it...? Liliana used phenomenon mixer before... It's a little different, but she practiced a similar magicka once, right?"

"Is that so? Liliana Zandyke's magic is largely unique to her. The only one who knew all of her abilities was Rogue. Regardless, what kind of damage does this 'rebound air' do?"

"It first has an effect on the ethereal body and the astral body. The damage is largely to the internal organs. Let's see... Do you have a taste for alcohol?"

"Well, yeah."

"It's like the kickback from taking a real stiff shot... It's kind of like getting punched in the mouth, right? I don't drink myself, so I can't swear that's the best comparison, but..."

Hearing Suimei's explanation, Graziella seemed to know exactly what kind of sensation he was talking about and grimaced accordingly.

"I'd rather not experience that. Especially not during a fight. It would be quite an unpleasant annoyance," she said. Then, with a grin creeping across her lips, she continued, "I've had a most amusing conversation with you, but..."

"...What?"

"You have a tendency for pedantry, don't you?"

It wasn't like Suimei didn't know that—he heard himself talk all the time. So instead of arguing, he smirked.

"Hah, doesn't everyone? It's just a question of how much. Part of thirst for knowledge is a desire for recognition. Trust me—you're not ever gonna find a saint who doesn't wanna tell you how to live your life."

"Hmm? Never mind that. More importantly, hasn't the flow of the match changed quite a bit?"

"It certainly has. That girl from the Elite Twelve seems to be up against a wall."

"Hey, you guys were the one asking questions..."

In the end, Suimei was willing to let it go at that. Like the other two girls, he returned his attention to the match. An extremely agitated Aerith was currently being provoked by Liliana. The fact that Aerith was oddly focused on Liliana was something Suimei had picked

up on before the fight had even started. But it was really coming to the forefront now that it was affecting their match.

“She’s a pretty tractable opponent, huh? She flipped her lid over just a little taunting... No, she completely blew her top, huh?”

“That is a bad type of passion—the kind the Elements dislike.”

“Aerith is young, after all. Well, I suppose that sounds strange coming from me since I’m even younger. But she went through more than most because of her pedigree, so she’s quite proud of herself and how far she’s made it... However, I still can’t accept that she’d be so easily taken for a ride. This needs rectifying... Though, judging from how things are looking, I suppose she’ll understand that by the end of the fight.”

Though this concerned an issue with one of her subordinates, Graziella didn’t seem particularly worried. Just as she suggested, if Liliana won here, Aerith would learn her lesson. Granted, that would only be true if Aerith was capable of realizing why she’d lost, but Graziella spoke as if that were a foregone conclusion.

“Wait, ain’t she your underling? You’re not gonna cheer for her?”

“It’s not in my nature to shout encouraging things. Besides, she doesn’t need me to. In any event, it looks like things are wrapping up here, no?”

In the arena, Liliana was beginning a chant that would bring about an end to the match.

“He who is in our surroundings, the one that our eyes cannot see. He who hides from all prying eyes, the voice that no one can hear. Now, in this very moment, reveal thine ambiguous existence to the world and lay bare everything far and wide. Thou art born of me, thou art named by me, thou art enslaved by me, thou art none other than mine own blood. Thus—”

As Liliana chanted, powerful mana gathered swiftly around her. Aerith was also gathering mana, but hers was completely overwhelmed by Liliana’s. As if taking it as some sort of signal, Howler returned to Liliana’s side and began growling. His deep, reverberating voice rippled through the air, doubling back on itself and increasing in intensity. It only further enhanced the unfolding mysteries as darkness bubbled up and formed subtle black lightning around Howler. As his growling grew and grew, it shook even the earth below, dislodging debris that began floating up towards the sky. It was like a dark, supernatural omen before some kind of catastrophe.

As Suimei watched this, he raised a curious eyebrow. Then, as if pointing the way to Howler, Liliana thrust out her finger.

“Hear me! Let out the calamitous howl that brings ruin to all! Intrinsic Curse, Astral Dive, Howl of Absolute Destruction!”

With her keywords activated, Howler let out a tremendous roar. It

was so strong that all who heard it instinctively cowered as they clapped their hands over their ears. And as it tore through the area, the arena and everything else nearby began to crumble. In response, Aerith formed a gigantic wall of water that dwarfed anything she'd used previously. But even that was a mere drop in the bucket before Howler, who charged blindly where Liliana pointed, continuing to howl all the while. The moment the pallid beast came into contact with Aerith's water wall, it burst into a sheet of white, foamy spray like a massive wave that had crashed on the shore.

A portion of the arena between the two girls collapsed from the shockwave. And when it was all said and done, Aerith too collapsed on the spot. Seeing this, Liliana spoke quietly with an unconcerned expression.

"Victory... is mine."

Indeed, the first match went to Liliana Zandyke.



The match continued to hold the attention of the audience long after it ended. The soldiers, mages, and even the other members of the Elite Twelve were dumbfounded upon witnessing Liliana's magicka. They all just stared at her blankly as she exited the arena. But they had every right to be so confounded and stupefied after beholding mysteries that were unthinkable with this world's magic. Disbelief was thick in the air.

"Aerith lost..."

"To think the most talented woman among the Elite Twelve would..."

"I've never seen magic like that before..."

"Is that the true power of dark magic?"

The crowd would continue to talk for some time.

After exiting the arena, Liliana met up with Reiji and the others, including Suimei, who'd rejoined the group. The first to greet her was the haughty Io Kuzami.

"As expected of my disciple. It is no exaggeration to say that everything you did was the pure embodiment of darkness. Even that final attack bore a close resemblance to force lightning," she said in a satisfied tone with her arms folded.



“Please don’t say... such incomprehensible things. And we are not... student and teacher. If you insist on parading such lies... I shall sue you for slander.”

“FUHAHAHA! There is none in this world that can judge me!”

Liliana did her best to shut Io Kuzami down, but her protest never even seemed to reach her ears. Io Kuzami was laughing all the while with a contented look on her face

After that, Reiji, Titania, and Lefille congratulated Liliana on her victory. Once they were done celebrating, Suimei beckoned Liliana over to where he and Felmenia were standing so that they could talk in secret.

“Liliana, the model of that familiar...”

“Yes, it was indeed... a dog. But what I used as reference... were those creatures from before.”

“The apparitions, huh?”

Liliana nodded. Suimei had suspected as much from its eerie appearance, and it turned out he was right on the money.

“You said before, Suimei... that not just your opponent’s... but also the sway of your own emotions... is important. So I thought that if I used... something I myself found frightening... it would be... particularly effective.”

“Yes, quite so! As I thought, it’s better when the magicka you show off is flashy!”

In response to Liliana’s explanation, Felmenia was nodding repeatedly with a satisfied look on her face. She was likely thinking back on her conversation with Suimei about firepower. An overwhelming amount of power with an overwhelming appearance to match. It would have a tremendous mental effect on both its target and its caster. But as Felmenia fantasized about all this, Liliana hung her head apologetically.

“The magicka I used this time... has changed quite a bit... from what you taught me.”

She’d stepped away from the spell as Suimei had taught it to her by putting her own spin on it. She felt that was a flaw to be corrected. However, Suimei was of a rather different opinion.

“I think it’s fine. Originality is proof that you have a strong handle on the material. It’s true that if you rely too heavily on your own senses, then you can get caught in a trap of your own design, but if you’re careful, then I have no complaints. There’re still some kinks to work out, but overall, I think you did a pretty good job.”

Hearing Suimei’s praise, Liliana smiled delightedly. From this match, he understood well that Liliana was fundamentally a different type of magician than Felmenia. If Felmenia was a hard worker, then

Liliana was a prodigy. Rather than Suimei's own style, hers was more akin to that of Suimei's assistant, Hydemary. As for her aptitude, she had an affinity for witchcraft. As long as she didn't limit herself to specializing in a single type of magicka, she had the potential to become quite a magician.

As their secret talk came to an end, Reiji hailed the three of them and waved them back over to the group.

"I really am surprised, Liliana-chan. I had no idea you were so strong."

"I-Indeed... I am a former member... of the Elite Twelve."

"So you were one of the stronger members then, huh?"

"No, that's not quite..."

Liliana couldn't exactly tell Reiji that her current abilities were because Suimei had been teaching her magicka. Not knowing what else to say, she ended up trailing off mid-conversation. But then, by a stroke of either good or bad luck, Io Kuzami cut in and interrupted things completely.

"Now that my disciple has given such a good show, I myself cannot just stand idly by."

"As I've been saying... I am not your—"

"But of course my disciple would have such a flashy taste for battle. Heh heh heh... For the next match, then, shall I personally show you all the quiet simplicity and subdued refinement of a plain fight?"

Paying Liliana no mind whatsoever, Io Kuzami continued to talk up her match. Hearing this, Reiji made a complicated expression as he leaned over towards Suimei with a hand cupped to his mouth.

"You hearing what she's saying, Suimei?"

"Yeah, there's no way in hell it's going to be plain. What does she even know about quiet simplicity and subdued refinement?"

"Whatever she's thinking when she says that, it's probably not what we're thinking when we hear it, huh?"

"The same as ever..."

"Mm, the same as ever..."

Both boys let out a sigh in the same breath as Io Kuzami entered the arena.



After the destruction wrought on the arena during the first match had been repaired, the second match was just about to start: the problem child with her chuuni powers at full throttle, Io Kuzami, versus Slane Zolnuf of the Elite Twelve.

Zolnuf was a young man who appeared to be about the same age as or slightly older than Aerith. His rusty red hair was smoothed down

and he had somewhat elegant features, but the perpetual smirk on his face detracted from his charm. If anything, he looked superficial. He also appeared to be a mage just like Aerith, and carried a short staff in one hand.

Both he and Io Kuzami rose to the arena without any sort of ceremony. And the one to take the initiative in the war of words before the match was the latter. She wore her own smirk as if to say she wouldn't lose out to Slane in any way, shape, or form.

"Now then, are you supposed to be my opponent?" she asked. "Aren't you quite the seedy-looking bastard? For them to send the likes of you against me... This is an insult."

"I hear you're the hero's companion, but aren't you getting a bit too cocky? If you say too much, won't it just be all the more embarrassing when you lose?"

Slane replied with a sneer to Io Kuzami talking down to him. As one would expect of a member of the Elite Twelve, he had the discretion not to get riled up over someone joking around. But Io Kuzami didn't particularly seem to care about having her taunting turned back around on her, either.

"Me? Lose? Not so. The one who shall be getting a full-course tasting of the dirt of defeat in this arena will be none other than yourself."

"That's some confidence you have..."

"This is not confidence. It's simply knowledge of the predetermined—that which you know as fate."

"You have a lot of nerve to say something so conceited. Who the hell do you think I am? I am Slane-sama of the Elite Twelve, you hear?"

With Io Kuzami's increasingly impudent claims, Slane gradually became more irritated. Though he was speaking glibly, his tone grew somewhat sharper. He even resorted to proudly bragging about his position, but...

"As if I care. To me, you shall simply be the bastard with the receding hairline."

"You fucking bitch! You've got that weird cloth wrapped around your neck, and you're gonna fucking make fun of my glorious hairstyle?!"

"Stop there, peon. Did you just insult the heroic muffler of love, bastard? Very well. I shall take extra care in personally showing you the very depths of hell."

The flames of rage were ignited in both of them upon having their styles insulted. It sounded like an extremely petty squabble, but the audience was getting into it. It was easy to take sides in a simple dispute like this, and the crowd grew noisy as they started shouting

rather inappropriate encouragement. As she was rather blatantly disrespecting the Elite Twelve, the booing for Io Kuzami was fairly expected. But, despite this being a military encampment, there were also shouts of “Die!” and “Kick the bucket already!” coming Slane’s way, giving a glimpse into what people really thought about him.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Your sins are your ignorance and your contempt for this favorite accessory of mine. You shall atone for them with your death.”

As their childish and vicious exchange came to an end, the match began... It began, but unlike Slane who immediately took his distance, Io Kuzami simply stood there with her arms folded and a fearless grin on her face. She wasn’t moving. She wasn’t chanting. She wasn’t doing anything, leaving Slane to take the initiative.

“Oh Earth! Stretch out and rise! Threaten my enemy’s foothold! Ground Lance!”

As he activated his keywords, the ground around him protruded upward. Wrecking the arena as it moved, it shot forward towards Io Kuzami. And rather than taking any evasive action, she stood perfectly still like she was just waiting for the collision. But then, just as she was about to be swamped...

“Hmph. There is nothing more foolish than using the earth against me.”

Murmuring to herself as though she were bored, Io Kuzami stamped her foot on the gray arena floor. The brisk sound of splashing liquid struck the audience’s ears, and the protruding earth settled down with an explosion. Slane looked surprised upon seeing his spell so trumped, but immediately tightened up his face.

“So you’re at least not all talk, huh?”

“Of course not. I am Io Kuzami, the absolute existence who has hold over everything in the world.”

As expected, she couldn’t help throwing in a bit of extra flair. And as she loudly declared herself to Slane and the audience, Suimei and Reiji were at their wits’ end. There was no saving her now. Even in a fantasy world like this, she was babbling completely beyond the realm of common sense. All they could do was look away.

“Oh yeah? Then tell me: is it the job of an absolute existence or whatever you claim to be to just stand there with your arms folded like an idiot?”

“Now you’ve done it. Very well. I shall showcase a rare technique just for a bastard like you.”

After being mocked for remaining still, Io Kuzami seemed to grow excited and ominously began laughing. But despite what she said, she continued to stand stock still with her arms folded. She still wasn’t doing anything, not even building up her mana. And just as everyone

began to suspect an anticlimactic end to her taunting, the surface of the stone area snapped without any warning. It was as if some invisible power had violently struck it. Seeing this, Slane looked disappointed.

“Oh, is that all you’ve got? All you did was just make some damn noise. That’s not a technique; that’s a bluff.”

“A bluff, you say? Hmph. If that’s what you think, then you should try it out for yourself. Here.”

“Ah—?”

Another loud sound rang out without Io Kuzami doing anything, this time something like a dry slap. It was Slane’s face, apparently smacked violently to the side by some invisible force.

“Guaah!”

Perhaps because he hadn’t seen it coming, Slane fell over to the side upon being struck. He quickly scrambled back to his feet and shook his head, as if to clear away the shock and confusion.

“Y-You bitch, what did you...”

“That just now? That was just the thrashing from servants of mine that cannot be seen by your mortal eyes.”

“Servants that... cannot be seen?”

“That’s right. Right now—in this very arena—my ever loyal and unseen servants stand ready to heed my command. In accordance with my will, at any time and place, they are ready to fight for my life. Look, this isn’t going to end with just a single strike, you know?”

“Gu—!”

As Io Kuzami finished speaking, the invisible thrashing continued to assault Slane. This time, a powerful blow struck him in the back of the head. Unable to sense what was coming at him, it was a completely one-sided fight. In an attempt to protect his head, he put his hands up in front of him and crouched down.

Slane’s bewilderment was obvious, but the same went for those in the audience. This phenomenon wasn’t magicka—there was no mana stirring in the area. Yet nevertheless, mystical things were happening. It was perfectly understandable that the crowd was flummoxed, and this included Felmenia.

“Unseen servants? But there isn’t...”

There wasn’t anything there. Even if she looked for incorporeal presences, there was no trace of anything. Unable to explain this herself, she turned to Suimei standing next to her.

“Um, Suimei-dono? Just what is that technique Io Kuzami-dono is using...?”

Felmenia saw Suimei looking at Io Kuzami through narrowed eyes like he was trying to ascertain what exactly she was. He continued to stare at her for a moment before answering.

“Spontaneous psychokinetic control.”

“Spontaneous psychokinetic control... you say?”

“That’s right. It’s a spiritualism technique. Beneath the layer of consciousness—I mean, it’s a technique that unconsciously creates phenomena in a person’s surroundings.”

“U-Ummm...”

“Think of a poltergeist. Even in this world, there are stories of strange creaking noises in houses or objects just flying off of shelves for no reason, right?”

“In old mansions, perhaps... You mean those stories from haunted houses and ancient castles, no? If so, then yes, I have heard of such things before.”

Even in this world, they had poltergeists. But because communication was relatively slow and limited, unlike in the modern world, it seemed information on them had yet to really spread. Lefille, pom-poms still in hand, had begun walking over to Suimei and Felmenia upon realizing they were talking about something. But as soon as she heard the words “haunted houses,” she shuddered, promptly did an about-face, and retraced her steps.

“Recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis, commonly referred to as RSPK, is just one facet of the phenomena associated with poltergeists. It often applies in cases where the real culprit isn’t just a spirit directly interfering with the world. In short, it occurs when people with strong sensitivity to the spiritual have an effect on their surroundings via residual emotions and ether. The trigger is assumed to be the caster’s spiritual power running wild. And what that damn Io Kuzami has done here is take a normally unconscious phenomenon and make it conscious so she can manipulate it.”

In other words, she’d brought a very unruly power under her control. And unlike regular magic, RSPK was controlled by residual emotions and ether. It manifested and behaved differently. It also took no chant or gestures to conjure and was invisible to the naked eye. Not even spiritual sight was enough to discern it. That was likely why Io Kuzami referred to the power as her unseen servants.

What she was really talking about was her “subliminal self,” an idea proposed by Frederic Myers that was largely regarded as unfounded by modern occultists. But that was turning a blind eye to the fact that the leader of theosophy, Helena Blavatsky, had mastered the technique over a hundred years ago. It was said that she would freely manipulate it to scare people, and so became known as a master of ghosts—a medium—and an icon of spiritualism. Though in reality, it wasn’t at all ghosts that she was manipulating.

After hearing Suimei’s explanation, Felmenia made a puzzled expression.

“I do not at all doubt its effectiveness, but it seems like a very roundabout technique. Would it not be more polished simply to perform a spell by just the power of one’s mind?”

“It’s true that magicka could accomplish the same thing. But this is different in that it’s based off of the perception of the person wielding it, so the quality of the technique is— Aha, that’s it! That’s what she meant about quiet simplicity and subdued refinement!”

In the middle of explaining things to Felmenia, Suimei interrupted himself, shouting out as if he’d stumbled upon a realization of some kind.

“Suimei-dono?”

“Remember what that damn Io Kuzami said after Liliana’s fight? She claimed she’d show us ‘the quiet simplicity and subdued refinement of a plain fight.’ Unlike regular magicka, this technique has no form or shape. It moves completely independently of the caster. The point is that she’s using something that’s the polar opposite of a familiar.”

“Ah...”

Suimei had assumed that Io Kuzami was just talking out of her ass as usual, but quite unexpectedly, she’d been up to something clever all along. And then, almost as if in acknowledgement of his realization, Io Kuzami tossed a sly smile his way. It irritated him to no end, but he could no longer deny what she’d said. She’d gotten him on this one. And seeing all this, Felmenia began adorably grumbling.

“Hmmm... It seems like a technique that is difficult to counter. If there’s no movement of mana, it must be hard to take countermeasures against something that cannot be seen.”

“Not really. The basis of the technique—the power of poltergeists—is a naturally occurring phenomenon, so it isn’t actually particularly strong or high-level. As long as your defenses are tight, there’s nothing to be scared of.”

“Then its aggressiveness is not a great threat?”

“Poltergeists are mostly just noisy, after all.”

In a way, when Slane had said Io Kuzami was just making noise, he was right. The technique was highly unpredictable because it was invisible, but it was possible to defend against it with just one’s arms. It made for an excellent surprise attack, but it wasn’t remarkably powerful.

“Slane! What are you doing?!”

After seeing Aerith defeated in the first match, Gorgan couldn’t help the panic that fell over him upon seeing Slane getting slapped around. His face was bright red as he shouted angrily into the arena. And it seemed an effective stimulus. Slane immediately stiffened and began chanting.

“Oh Wind! Thou shalt become my barrier and protect me! Air Wall!”

Immediately following his keyword, the wind in the area formed a defensive wall around him. Io Kuzami’s psychokinesis was unable to penetrate it, and so the invisible beating came to an end. Seeing that Slane had come up with a way to defend against her technique, Io Kuzami scattered her thoughts to dismiss it.

“Hmph. So you can at least defend against an attack of this level, can you?”

“You’ve really done it now, you fucking bitch...”

“Well, it would be a disappointment if I could defeat you without ever moving from this spot. Were you as brittle as the third bridge of a ship, the fight would be too boring. The audience would have nothing to get excited over.”

“You damn... You’ve been talking nothing but nonsense for way too long now! Are you fucked in the head or something?”

After taking such a beating without getting a single hit in edgewise, Slane was quite irritated. He raved at Io Kuzami, but she didn’t seem to care at all.

“For you not to understand my refined words... It seems not just your hairline, but also the contents of your head have waned.”

At Io Kuzami’s keen riposte, the crowd erupted into raucous laughter. Reiji, who was watching over all of this intently, leaned over to Suimei.

“Io Kuzami-san... It seems she’s doing alright for now.”

“Yeah, for now.”

Suimei seemed to be implying that was all subject to change, and Reiji nodded with a troubled expression. He knew there was a possibility things could go south. The match was far from over, and they had no idea what would happen next. They had to stay on their toes. If things took a turn for the strange, they would be the ones who had to stop Io Kuzami. Meanwhile, across the arena from them, Gorgan was still shouting.

“You hear me, Slane?! You cannot lose! Another defeat will tarnish our reputation!”

“I know!”

Gorgan himself had clashed with Io Kuzami back in the tent, so he must have been particularly wary of her. After shouting at Slane, he just glared fixedly at her. But again, Gorgan’s words had an immediate effect on Slane. He’d been on the verge of panic, but collected himself somewhat after being reprimanded by the head of the Elite Twelve. The insults he’d endured were still eating away at him, but he calmly surveyed Io Kuzami. It was then that she finally decided to use a spell of her own and began chanting.

“Oh Fire and Wind. Brave the skies with your merciless sweltering heat and consume all the air within. Strangle the one before me with gasping agony. Respiring Burn!”

Not a moment after she activated her keywords, the sky above the arena coiled into a fiery vortex. It looked like a spell intended to heat the atmosphere to the point that just breathing in the air was dangerous.

“Oh Wind! Thou shalt act in accordance with my will and blow fiercely! Send the sweltering heat and chilling air that threatens me beyond the horizon! Continuum Wind!”

Slane countered Io Kuzami’s magic with a wind spell of his own. It seemed he was trying to defend himself by redirecting the danger away from him. But when his gust met the superheated stream of air coming down from Io Kuzami’s fire coil, they collided in a duel of swirling currents overhead.

The two mages then began fighting to see who could pour more mana into their spell and overcome the other. Really, it was a contest of endurance. And there was no way a human stood a chance against the mana reserves of a spirit. Giving in first, Slane’s breath was completely ragged.

“Ridiculous...! Just... how much mana...”

“This is nothing. Hardly even worth mentioning. But for you to give up here... Hmph. It seems the children of man in this age have grown weak.”

Io Kuzami muttered to herself in discouragement for some unintelligible reason before dismissing her coil of wind and fire.

“You bitch...”

Slane’s gaze turned exceptionally sinister. He seemed to be under the impression that Io Kuzami was taking pity on him by releasing her spell. Little did he know it was no act of kindness.

“Now then, it is about time that we settle this. It seems you have already spent too much of your mana and can no longer move, after all.”

“Ugh...”

Io Kuzami’s eccentric laughter rang through the arena as she pronounced Slane’s defeat.

“Let me see... The technique that I shall use to bring you and your fate to their knees this day shall be... the kick which kills billions.”

“Th-The kick which kills billions...?”

“That’s right. I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami. In the mere span of the blink of an eye, killing billions is child’s play for me.”

Standing on her side of the arena, Io Kuzami made what was perhaps her most unbelievable claim yet. Hearing it, both Reiji and

Suimei looked at each other.

“There she goes, Reiji...”

“Hmm... But what does she mean, I wonder? It’s not like she’s suddenly going to grow a billion feet... right?”

Reiji began trying to guess what Io Kuzami was up to. Surely it was impossible that her feet would magically multiply exponentially. But the scariest thing about Io Kuzami was that she did occasionally do the impossible.

“Hear me, my unseen servants! The time has come to hold a magnificent banquet right here and now!”

Io Kuzami used her psychokinetic powers to liven up the arena. She then approached Slane, who was completely spent and immobile from using up all his mana.

“Man with the receding hairline and brains, behold! Take a glimpse of the surface of Schwarzschild with this kick of mine! Take this! THE KICK WHICH KILLS BILLIOOOOONS!”

Io Kuzami lifted her leg behind her and swung, feinting here and there. Slane tried his best to dodge, but it made no difference. He was at the complete mercy of her kick. Rather, his family jewels were.

“NOT THEEEEEEEEEEEERE!”

Slane’s piteous shriek filled the air as Io Kuzami’s boot connected squarely with his manhood, causing him to faint in agony. Frothing at the mouth, he collapsed on the spot.

It was a blow that never should have been used in a duel, but it certainly got the audience fired up. Plenty of the men in the crowd looked blue in the face as they reflexively covered their own crotches, but there were also energetic cheers of “You deserved that!” and “Well done!” coming from all directions. There was even a small, odd demographic in the audience whispering things like, “I’m jealous...” and “I want to get kicked like that too...”

Yet in the midst of the celebrating, there was Reiji, who had his head cocked curiously to the side.

“But... where does the billions part come in?”

“Come on, Reiji. The number of sperm.”

“Aah, right... What a stupid technique...”

Upon having the significance of the technique’s name explained to him, Reiji let out a complicated sigh. But Suimei, after doing the explaining, suddenly furrowed his brow.

“Actually, there shouldn’t even be billions in someone’s testicles... Realistically speaking, it should be lower than that.”

“Yeah, but... this is Io Kuzami we’re talking about. When has she ever spoken realistically? It’s just her wild imagination running rampant and coming out of her mouth.”

“Aaah, yeah. Good point. Of course you’d understand her.”



“Don’t say it like that. You’re making it sound like I’m in league with her.”

“I’m afraid it’s already too late for us, man.”

“You don’t have to say it. I know.”

And so Reiji planted his face in his hands as the second match came to an end with Io Kuzami’s victory and loud laughter.



A little later, during the third match...

“Bastard, bastard, bastard, BASTAAAAAAAARD!”

There was a stout yell coming from the arena.

“I am one of the Elite Twelve, a glorious noble of the Empire! Just why should I be subject to a grueling fight with a commoner like you?!”

Despite his angry bellowing, the shouting man’s resolve was starting to waver as he fell into a swivet.

“Impossible! This is just impossible!”

Of course, the person he was shouting at was his opponent for the match.

“Man, you’ve really got one easy to read personality, don’t you...?” Suimei assessed his opponent in an exasperated voice.

Noble Baaldan Dostolf Zegent was currently in the arena of the imperial military encampment. He was fighting against a commoner from the hero’s world, and he found himself in something of a predicament he’d never experienced before.

That predicament wasn’t that he was falling behind in the fight, but rather that he was panicking and at a complete loss as to how to proceed. The fight wasn’t over yet. Winner and loser had yet to be decided, but it was plain to see Baaldan was being driven up against the wall. Mentally, if nothing else.

It wouldn’t be inaccurate to say that Baaldan had bought his position in the Elite Twelve. But even so, he had the conceit and magic talent to stand up to most of the other members. He wasn’t totally unworthy of the title. He’d been born of a noble house, graduated from the Magic Institute, and even proven himself on the battlefield in a war against a southern nation. He had a considerable résumé, and his upbringing was nothing to sneeze at.

Moreover, Baaldan had a magic technique that only he could use. It inflated his ego considerably, but he hardly considered that an issue. Not with his power.

The power of chained magic. Using peculiar patterns and intonation, he could chant spells incessantly without even a pause for breath between them. It was a unique technique that allowed him to

use powerful spells in quick succession. It was the crowning jewel of his power. His trump card. With it, he'd won numerous battles. Be it against soldiers, monsters, or stray demons, he was always victorious. But today, here in the encampment arena, he was unmistakably being led by the nose.

Ridiculous! Ridiculous! Ridiculous! How can this be?!

And the one doing the leading was a commoner who'd been summoned alongside the hero of Astel. His face was plain and there was nothing particularly remarkable about him. By all appearances, he was a completely average, commonplace boy. If someone had to pick out an example of riffraff off the streets, they would undoubtedly point to him. He was the very embodiment of mediocrity.

"I shall show my cohorts who put on such unsightly displays how a man of noble blood fights!" Baaldan had declared to Gorgan before the fight.

And then, upon seeing his opponent...

"My opponent is clearly a mere country bumpkin! How unsavory! It is unacceptable that I should have to fight such a scruffy-looking fellow! Can you even use magic? Do you even understand what magic is in the first place?"

And to that, his opponent had replied...

"Just because you have magic doesn't mean you understand it. Only when you are endowed with knowledge are you truly able to use magic. Then comes understanding, no?"

From what Baaldan had heard, the world the hero came from was completely devoid of magic. That meant the hero and his companions had only learned of it after coming here, and it had scant been half a year since they were summoned. Such green youngsters couldn't possibly put up a fight against someone who'd studied magic for decades. Or at least, that's what he'd thought.

But when he opened the cover and got a closer look, it was a different story. This commoner was using completely bizarre magics to fend off Baaldan's attacks. It wouldn't have been all that intimidating coming from a desperate opponent fighting on his last legs. Baaldan wouldn't have felt up against a wall if that were the case here. But this boy wasn't fighting. No, he was acting like he was merely playing with a child. He even had the audacity to hum between incantations. And no matter how serious Baaldan got, he couldn't make any headway. The boy just kept humming.

Of course, the audience was having their own reaction to this. Shock and awe wormed their way through the noisy crowd. Not because a member of the Elite Twelve was being dominated, but because the commoner was fighting with magic in ways they'd never seen before. It was like he'd found a magical blind spot and was

comfortably sitting there as he casually poked and prodded his opponent. Everyone watched the one-sided fight unfold in wonderment and surprise, including Gorgan Bartwood Goalt.

For example, if Baaldan used fire magic, the boy would use wind magic—which should have fanned the flames, but instead blew them out. If Baaldan used water magic, rather than using the tried and true tactic of conjuring earth magic to make a well and divert it, he summoned plants with wood magic to absorb it. Even when Baaldan used multiple spells chained together with his signature technique, the boy would counteract each and every one. Baaldan hadn't even come close to laying a finger on him.

This increasingly irritated him, and he quickly moved to fire yet another spell at the boy. But the moment he thought for sure it would connect, it lost its power and vanished.

“Wha—?!”

It was just like when Aerith Melfein had fired magic at the ghostly dog Liliana Zandyke had summoned. And the commoner was just laughing at this development. Baaldan couldn't tell if it was out of scorn, mockery, or simply delight. He had no idea what the boy was thinking, but perhaps that wasn't important. The remarkable thing here was that he even had the composure and leisure to be laughing in the middle of a fight in the first place.

“Making fun of me...!”

That laughter fanned the indignant flames of Baaldan's anger to an apoplectic extreme. He looked like he might just die of a stroke on the spot. And his little fit didn't help him any, considering the circumstances. Even when he fired off two or three more spells in rapid succession, every single one of them was deflected just like all his others had been.

It was something that happened quite frequently in gambling. When a gambler was constantly one-upped by the house or an opposing player, they often grew desperate. That desperation would cost them their ability to make clear decisions, and ultimately the game. And the more one lost, the greater the sense of desperation became. It was a vicious cycle. One that was very difficult to get out of once you slipped into it. And that was exactly how this fight was going for Baaldan.

“Now then, it's about time that I make my move, huh? Here we go... Oh Wind. Heed my will and butcher my enemy. Strike Wind.”

As the commoner threw down the gauntlet, he incanted a wind spell. The gust of wind he fired from his hands was simple and low level, but had considerable destructive force to it. For a member of the Elite Twelve like Baaldan, dealing with it would be nothing... but it was annoying. It had enough power behind it that he actually needed

to defend against it, which only irritated him more.

“Oh Earth! Surround me and become a firm bulwark! Absolutely none shall pass and threaten this life! Earth Wall Rising!”



The ground rose up around Baaldan and hardened, forming a sturdy earthen wall that the boy's wind magic crashed into and dispersed across.

"Did you think that kind of petty magic would work? You damnable fool!"

"No, one probably won't— Oh Wind. Heed my will and butcher my enemy × 7. Strike Wind Sevenfold."

"Wha—?!"

After the commoner's complete joke of a chant, seven instances of his Strike Wind magic manifested. With seven times the mana now assaulting Baaldan's earthen barrier, it shook before crumbling completely.

"No way... For such a low level wind spell to break my bulwark..."

It was impossible. After being led around by the nose all this time, he now had to put up with this kind of magic. It was no wonder Baaldan was furious.

"Th-Then how about this?! Oh Fire! Blossom, burn, and billow even more majestically! Become the very avatar of conflagration! Grand Flame!"

"As for me... Oh Scarlet. With your mix of jet and vermillion, plunder the color of red from all eyes. A flame with no color has no right to call itself a flame. Little Red Thief."

Baaldan unleashed a spell that created an enormous fireball, and the boy incanted a fire spell of his own in response. But as far as Baaldan could tell, all he'd done was conjure a red marble. No, several of them. They were appearing all over the arena. It looked like he was planning on trumping quality with quantity. Yet Baaldan's fireball was only growing bigger.

When it came into contact with the marbles, it consumed them. A chain of magic explosions was set off, and all of it was swallowed by Baaldan's fireball. It swelled so large and so red that Baaldan thought he was seeing things. It looked like his fireball was disappearing.

And that was exactly what happened. When the red light faded, both Baaldan's fireball and all the red marbles were gone. It seemed that with so much magic fire in one place, it burned so intensely that it smothered itself.

"You and your underhanded techniques!"

"Isn't it amusing? Red is the essence of fire. Its color is unaffected by temperature. So the redder mystical fire is, the higher quality—and thus more powerful—it is. Conversely, when it loses color, it also loses power."

"Losing its power because it loses color?! Stop spouting nonsense! Magic does not lose the divine power granted to it by the Elements for

such a stupid reason!”

“Wow, so that’s right over your head, huh? You really don’t understand anything.”

“Tch, if fire magic won’t work, then I’ll just use a different magic to—”

“Nope. Unfortunately it’s about time you run out of steam.”

“What?”

“Let’s take a time out here.”

The commoner then exaggeratedly shrugged and stood there defenselessly as he started repeating nonsensical words. Rolling his shoulders and craning his neck, he looked like he was stretching to relax. All in the middle of battle, no less.

“Are you stupid? Doing that during a match...”

Despite Baaldan’s warning, the boy didn’t look like he cared or was even listening. His blatant disrespect relit Baaldan’s anger anew, and he set straight to using a spell to show his dissatisfaction.

“Oh Lightning! Light— L-Lightning...”

Yet for some reason, the chant just wouldn’t leave his mouth.

“Ligh.... Li...”

With that last syllable, his throat dried and tightened. He broke out into a cold sweat all over, and his heart began palpitating furiously. He couldn’t chant anymore, much less speak. He couldn’t talk at all. It was like his body was telling him no.

“Hahh, hahh...”

Completely out of breath, Baaldan looked over at the commoner. He looked bored and disappointed, like he’d known this was going to happen. Like he was looking down on Baaldan for not knowing better. He then looked at Baaldan like a scholar observing a research subject.

“My goodness, I’ve heard the theory, but this is honestly the first time I’ve seen it happen for myself.”

“What... are you...?”

“Listen, it’d be best for you to stop unreasonably using magic chained together like that. It seems you can do that because you have a larger capacity than most people, but it’s not like you have a radiator or a water pump or anything. The only end result is overheating like that.”

“L-Like I said, stop spouting nonsense!”

“Seriously... If you’re a mage, get a freaking clue.”

With that, the commoner completely shut Baaldan down. This was impossible. For him to be so disgracefully humiliated by a commoner... It was impossible.

“I am a noble! I’m special! There’s no way something like that can happen... Bastard, you must have used another underhanded technique to...”

As Baaldan rebuked the boy for foul play, he let out a grand sigh. But then, as if he'd just thought of something amusing, he cracked a smile and began laughing. It was a dark, ominous smile and a deep, sinister laugh.

"Heh heh heh, what are you talking about? No, if I've been caught, then there's no denying it now, is there?"

"Bastard, as I thought... Come clean!"

Just what had he done? Baaldan beheld him with a judgmental stare. And as he awaited his answer, the commoner smugly rubbed his chin.

"See over there?"

The boy thrust his arm out as he snapped his fingers. Baaldan followed it with his eyes, but beyond where the boy was pointing...



"What's over—"

The imperial noble Baaldan Dostolf Zegent's voice hung in the otherwise quiet air. Suimei had pointed to something with a snap of his fingers and Baaldan had instinctively looked. But, naturally, it was just the two of them in the arena. Nothing more, nothing less.

"There's nothing th— Ah! No, it can't be!"

"You fell for it, you idiot!"

By the time Baaldan realized what he'd just walked into, it was too late. He'd been made a fool of. And in the instant he looked away, Suimei had closed the distance. As for Reiji and Felmenia who were watching...

"Come on, Suimei... You can't just..."

"Suimei-dono..."

They both sounded defeated. What Suimei had just done was no better than sneaking in a sucker punch after shouting, "It's a UFO!" or "Look, a flying pig!" It was like a gag straight out of a manga. The success rate on such a stupid trick of a tactic was frightfully low, but Suimei had had the perfect act and setup. He'd actually managed to pull it off.

While Baaldan was distracted, Suimei unleashed a flurry of blows on him. He intentionally drove his fists into several vital spots in Baaldan's core, but his last punch was squarely focused on the underside of his chin. And he didn't hesitate to raise his fist in victory. Though Baaldan saw exactly where this was going, he had no way of stopping it. That last blow spelled his inevitable defeat.

"Guh, ah... T-To use such a classic move..."

"It's your fault for falling for it. Rather, for not properly paying attention to your surroundings. You really gotta start all over back from the basics, dude. That's what you get for underestimating people.

Freaking idiot.”

Under the hail of Suimei’s verbal abuse, Baaldan fell to the ground. In the end, it was something of an anticlimactic fight.

“Well, with that much blood rushing to his head, he couldn’t think properly anyways.”

Naturally, Baaldan couldn’t hear Suimei making fun of him anymore. After surpassing his limits from continuous usage of magic, he’d gotten short of breath and deliriously feverish due to his lack of mana. Hardly anyone could defend themselves in that condition. Baaldan had treated Suimei like a lesser opponent the entire fight, and this outcome was just proof that people with massive egos were easy to manipulate. He was so blinded by his disdain for his opponent that he hadn’t been able to see the actual difference in their abilities. And that ultimately spelled his defeat. It was no different from when Graziella fell into the trap of magicka melt. It should have been easily avoidable.

The continuous use of serial magic, in itself, wasn’t all that uncommon. It was a valuable technique in Suimei’s world. Any decent magician could do it. But they had knowledge of entropy and, more importantly, mana furnaces—something the people of this world were sorely lacking. Without mana furnaces, they had no way of converting the wasted heat and mana into steam to get rid of it. It would just build and build until they overheated like Baaldan had. But he was lucky he’d stopped when he did. More extreme cases of overheating could result in compromised vision or even blindness.

As Suimei was thinking through all this, he exited the arena and approached his friends, who had plenty to say.

“Say, Tia, Suimei’s fight and the one before it were basically on the same level, weren’t they...?”

“I lost to a man who does stuff like that... Unforgivable.”

“Suimei-kun, this is grounds for a sermon.”

Reiji was exasperated, Titania was burning with an aura of anger directed at Suimei, and Lefille was itching to lecture him.

“Uhhh...”

In the end, the third match would go down as victory by surprise attack.



Immediately following the conclusion of the matches...

“There is no way that such a thing could...”

He genuinely hadn’t thought that the Elite Twelve could be defeated. But he’d observed all of the matches for himself, leaving him in a dumbfounded state repeating the same words of disbelief over and over.

All three members of the Elite Twelve he'd chosen were supposed to win against their opponents. He acknowledged that there was a chance—however unlikely—that Aerith might lose to Liliana, but Slane and Baaldan... Their victories should have been certain.

But reality was harshly different from expectation. Both up-and-comers and veterans of the Elite Twelve alike had been defeated. Worse yet, the last two matches had ended in humiliation. As the head of the Elite Twelve, Gorgan couldn't possibly stand for this. Yet the shock of the landslide defeat was so great that he couldn't even think of anything to say. He simply stared on in awe, his thoughts in complete disarray. And while he was in this daze, Reanat appeared, accompanied by his attendant.

"Gorgan."

"Y-Your Imperial Highness..."

Even staggered by defeat, Gorgan at least had the wherewithal to remember his manners in front of the prince and took a knee in a fluster. Reanat then asked for confirmation in a tone like he was admonishing his subordinate.

"The matches have all concluded. You no longer have any complaints, correct?"

"Your Highness, I cannot apologize enough for the unsightly display the members of the Elite Twelve put on for you."

"There was no helping it. Their opponents today were poor matches for them."

"But for the Elite Twelve to be so humiliated in such underhanded fights, Aerith aside... This will have an effect on the glorious reputation of the imperial army. I feel that we must take some sort of responsibility."

"Responsibility, you say?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and taking responsibility was Gorgan's desperate plan. In essence, if the Elite Twelve went down, the entire army would suffer for it. And he was planning on preying on that fact. Surely the prince wouldn't stand for such a national embarrassment. With his permission, rather than accepting defeat, Gorgan would contest the matches and lodge complaints against the opponents that had defeated Slane and Baaldan. That way it wouldn't be a complete defeat, and he could mitigate the damage done to the Elite Twelve's name. If the public took their side in an outcry of sympathy, then they even stood to gain something out of this.

But this plan all hinged on the prince. And so Gorgan bowed his head, waiting to hear Reanat's reply. Whether or not he realized exactly what Gorgan was up to, he shook his head.

“Gorgan, these matches were the result of you obsessing over your opponents, their attitudes, and their skills from the very beginning. It had nothing to do with responsibility. Thus, there is no need for you to take responsibility now.”

“But...”

Not getting the answer he was hoping for, Gorgan tried to cling to the conversation. But rather than the prince’s soft voice, a haughty scoff came in reply.

“As such, from here on, you shall refrain from such impertinent interference.”

It was Graziella, approaching from behind.

“Your Imperial Highness Graziella...”

“What’s with that nasty face? Do you disapprove?”

“With all due respect, this is a matter that concerns more than just those who fought today. This concerns all of the Elite Twelve, including you as one of its members, Your Highness.”

“Are you in any sort of position to be plotting so? You intend to challenge the fights to have the results questioned, don’t you? I’ve already seen through your ulterior motive.”

As Graziella laughed scornfully, Gorgan was unable to argue and simply stayed silent. Graziella then suddenly went from laughing to looking rather serious.

“Well, regardless of your scheming, I understand your discontent with regards to the Empire’s current situation. It’s now the status quo that our allied nations are less than enthusiastic. Yet if the Elite Twelve were to make an impression now, it would demonstrate the Empire’s strength both at home and abroad.”

“If Your Highness understands such things, then...”

“Gorgan, did my elder brother not say so just now? They were bad matchups. Accept the results.”

Even with Graziella rebuking him, Gorgan didn’t seem ready to back down. It was likely the stubbornness of the conceit he’d built up as an important mage over the years. His sour expression and the light in his dull eyes said loud and clear that he hadn’t accepted anything. Reading such subtleties, Graziella let out a sigh.

“You must have seen it for yourself. Liliana has already been released from the malevolent bonds of dark magic and become a powerful master in her own right. And the one who calls herself Io Kuzami played a key role in repelling a demon general. Against those kinds of opponents, it would be childish to claim that their victories were hollow.”

“But that man who fought in the last match... He was simply joking around.”

“Did you see that as joking around?”

“That kind of fighting... All I saw was him teasing his opponent.”

“Hmph. Did it also look that way to you, elder brother?”

As Graziella deferred to her brother, Reanat made a slightly bitter expression.

“Let me see... Regardless of what the truth may be, from the standpoint of a mere observer, it could honestly be said that it was an unsatisfying fight. Do you not think so, Lyla?”

“As I suspected. Without a proper perspective, things can appear very skewed. Having fought against that man once myself, I know the skill he possesses for tactics and magic is boundless. That last trick was out of bounds, however.”

Yet despite how the fight had ended, from Graziella’s point of view, Suimei’s performance was remarkable because it meant that he’d completely seen through his opponent. It may not have looked that way to anyone else, but having fought Suimei before, Graziella knew just what it meant to fall into one of his traps.

“With all due respect, Your Highness, in what way is that man’s skill boundless? I can hardly see that he has any at all.”

“My god, you still don’t see it for yourself? You’ve grown senile. Out of all of them, that man is the most dangerous.”

“That man is?”

“That’s right. Besides, you yourself said that he was just joking around. Just think about that for a moment. What that really means is that he’s so powerful that such a fight was merely a joke to him. But Baaldan was taunting him from the outset. He was asking for it, so he simply retaliated in kind, even if he did go too far... Or do you have something to say about Baaldan’s carelessness?”

“...No, Your Highness.”

There, Reanat turned to Graziella as though he’d just remembered something.

“Lyla, back when you fought against our guest from the other world, I heard that you overwhelmed him?”

“Quite so. But I came to learn afterward that he was gravely injured at the time I fought him. And I resent the implication.”

There was clear discontent and other unresolved emotion in Graziella’s voice.

“But to think he would so frivolously defeat one of the Elite Twelve...”

Reanat hadn’t evaluated Suimei all that highly. At best, he thought he was around or below the level of the Elite Twelve. But Reanat didn’t know about *that*.

“Elder brother, I do believe you’ve heard reports of the recent demon invasion in Astel.”

“Aah, you mean where ten thousand demons and monsters were

defeated? Yes, what about it?"

"The one who did that... seems to have been that man on his own."

Hearing Graziella grow timid at such a declaration, Reanat's expression became severe.

"...Ridiculous. Ten thousand demons? On his own? No matter how strong he is, that's..."

"I do not think Her Royal Highness Titania would lie on the matter. Besides, isn't the fact that Liliana Zandyke has amassed so much power in such a short amount of time also sufficient proof of his strength?"

"It was reported to me that our guest from another world was not a hero, though..."

"Yes, that is correct. However, in their world, there are apparently masters scattered about who surpass even him."

"Is that true?"

As Reanat questioned her with a hint of fright in his voice, Graziella meekly nodded. Seeing that, Reanat was at a loss for words. Graziella then tossed Gorgan a sidelong glance.

"Gorgan, do not even think of attacking that man under the cover of darkness. Understood? Should you try, you won't like the results. They *will* be dire."

Gorgan could only nod back at Graziella's warning.

But he wasn't the only one getting a lecture right now. Suimei was still getting an earful from Titania and the tiny Lefille.

Chapter 3: Their Respective Battles

And thus, under the command of Prince Reanat, the battle between the imperial army and the demon horde was proceeding smoothly. His plan was to lay traps and ambushes all along the mountain paths leading from the savage northern lands of the Empire into its territory proper, and spring them at the first sight of the incoming demons. To that end, scouts were sent even to the most inhospitable locations so long as it would gain them the vantage they needed. And so far, it was working wonderfully. The main corps of the army was then left to defend against what demons did manage to make it through the traps, and they were staunchly holding the line as they waited for allied reinforcements.

So, between their traps and having the defensive position, the advantage in this battle was inevitably the Empire's. Unlike the flat wastelands of the northern Alliance, even the terrain was on their side here. The mountainous slopes and cliffs gave them countless opportunities to stage ambushes and catch their enemy off guard. Moreover, they'd had access to reliable intelligence before the battle even started. The demons had forcibly pushed their way through the other countries leading up to the Empire, giving the Empire a chance to observe their movements and prepare accordingly. In essence, it took them long enough to get to the Empire that the Empire was ready and waiting for them when they arrived.

And because things were going so perfectly according to plan, Suimei and the others had initially been left to oversee the main encampment rather than be called to battle. This was largely to allow the imperial army enough time to establish a foothold and claim the glory for taking control of the fight, but now that they had done so, Suimei and the others were finally being called to action after a few days of waiting. And since Lefille had returned to her original form in that time, she was the first one Reanat petitioned.

"Is it really alright to entrust an entire unit to one such as myself?"

"I am fully aware that your powers are not limited to your prowess in battle, Shrine Maiden-dono. I would like you to lead a unit and unleash the power of the spirits to your heart's content."

And so, Lefille led a unit of imperial soldiers to take part in the operation of stalling the demons. She marched with them to a

strategic point in the mountain range, and was now looking down at the demons. Her unit was lined up in a grove of trees along the top of a cliff overlooking the demons snaking their way up the narrow, winding mountain path. They had no idea she and her men were there, making it the perfect opportunity for a surprise attack.

“It seems... it’s about to rain here.”

But while everyone else was looking down, a quiet voice at the front of the formation—right at the boundary between the thickets and the cliff’s edge—lamented the foreboding signs of rain overhead. Lefille’s red hair, bound in its usual ponytail, swayed ever so slightly as she turned to Liliana atop a small horse. She honestly wasn’t sure if Liliana had just arrived or if she’d blended in with the troops earlier, but appearing when least expected was almost no surprise from a former member of the Empire’s intelligence division— no, of the Sword Master of the Lonely Shadow’s daughter.

“Lily, did you need something?”

“Yes. I’ve come to report the current situation.”

“Please do.”

“Just as planned, the main encampment has begun preparations to retreat further south. If nothing of note happens, then Hero Reiji and Her Royal Highness Titania—who are still at the encampment—will stay out of the fray and retreat with everyone else. It seems the prince intends to put them to work in the decisive battle.”

“So they haven’t been deployed yet, hmm? As I suspected...”

“It’s because Hero Reiji doesn’t have much combat experience. Rather than having him fight here on such rugged terrain, I imagine the tacticians and such determined that he would better be able to display his power elsewhere. Besides, if he fights in a larger battle with more troops, it will increase both his odds of survival as well as morale.”

As Liliana concluded her report, Lefille exhaled slowly as if to expel the tension lurking in her chest.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I’m just a little relieved.”

“You were uneasy about how they were going to use Reiji, right?”

“It’s not like Reiji-kun is the Empire’s hero, after all. I was wondering how they were intending to use him. I wouldn’t have been surprised if they didn’t use him at all for fear of him stealing their glory, or worse, signed him up for some bizarre and risky strategy under the pretense that he would be fine because he’s a hero.”

“There’s no need to worry. His Highness Reanat... isn’t the scheming type like His Majesty the Emperor.”

In other words, that might have happened if the emperor himself were commanding this battle. He wouldn’t have hesitated to call on

the hero's divine protection for his own gain.

"Now, how about Suimei-kun?"

"It seems he's been allowed to move as he sees fit. His Highness Reanat did not assign him a location or give him any other specifications. Since military gains aren't being stressed as important now, the prince informed him he may do as he likes so long as he doesn't get in the way."

"Which means... His Highness Reanat has a powerful pawn like Suimei-kun at his disposal, but couldn't think of an effective way to use him."

"Probably. His Highness Reanat's strength is in orchestrating teams, after all. Suimei is something of a special exception."

Suimei, like Lefille and the others, was worth at least an entire squad on his own. That meant that no matter what squad or unit he was put into, he would be well out of the league of his fellow comrades. There was the possibility of sending him on a mission on his own, but Reanat didn't know what kind of war potential he really had. And so, stuck between a rock and a hard place, he and his army ended up in the strange position of wanting to deploy Suimei, but having no idea how. If he was like Lefille and had the charisma to lead a unit of his own, it would have been a different story altogether.

"I'm a magician and a student, you know? Ain't it obvious I can't do anything like that?" he'd said before Lefille's unit departed.

As she recalled that curious conversation with a smile, Liliana surveyed their current surroundings.

"I see... things are going according to plan... here as well."



“Yeah, look. Those damnable demons have rather carelessly stretched themselves thin. If we attack here, we should be able to do more damage than we were expecting.”

Choosing this location for the ambush was part of Lefille’s strategy. That said, the route the demons were taking had been confirmed beforehand. All Lefille really had to do was guide her unit there and cast the net. Since the demons were making their way along the narrow mountain path, their ranks were noticeably thinner than usual. They were only walking two or three abreast. Attacking them from above now would throw their entire line into disorder, and it wouldn’t be impossible to exterminate every last one in a melee after that.

“Has the oil... already been prepared?” Liliana asked.

“With no delays,” Lefille answered, pointing.

On the far right and left flanks of the unit, several men were gathered around large earthenware pots. Under these circumstances, fire would prove a rather handy tool for them. It wouldn’t do anything against the demons because of their protection from the Evil God, but they had regular monsters mixed in their ranks, and that changed things considerably. After dropping boulders at the start and end of their line and then pouring the oil, Lefille’s mage team would light a blaze to cause chaos while the main unit attacked. It was a relatively simple strategy, but when properly set up, extremely effective. As their likelihood for victory was demonstrated to Liliana, she closed her eye in relief and stroked the neck of her horse.

“Then with this... I will take my leave.”

“What’s next for you?”

“I’ve finished my rounds... so I’ll return to the main encampment... for now. After that... I’ll probably be used for communications again.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

“Very well.”

As Liliana made her way to the back of the unit, she suddenly seemed to vanish right along with the horse she was riding. It was one thing for her to make herself disappear, but for the horse too... It left Lefille wondering what kind of wiles she was using, and whether it was something she’d learned from the Sword Master of the Lonely Shadow or Suimei. No, perhaps it was a combination of the two. In any event, Lefille mounted her own horse and turned to the soldiers behind her. She then issued them their orders as if she were completely unafraid of the demons just below.

“The time has come for us to make our move! As soon as the boulders are in place, the mages will let loose fire magic at the front

and rear of their formation while we attack the center! We will treat them to a banquet of rock and oil, and entertain them in the theater of flames! Now, ready yourselves!”

In response to Lefille’s rally, the soldiers let out hushed but passionate cries of praise for both her and the Goddess. Morale was extraordinarily high, considering the circumstances. It was a sign of just how much faith the men had in their Goddess and her power. Precisely as Reanat planned, the effect of the Shrine Maiden of the Spirits’ glorious name had an explosive effect in the fight against demons.

After Lefille’s unit completed their preparations, they pushed large rocks off the far sides of the cliff. The weight of them alone crushed several demons and monsters in the fall. Immediately following the rocks came a rain of viscous and extremely flammable oil, and then fire.

“The demons are in complete disarray...”

“Good... Just like that...”

As the demons at the front and rear of their formation began scrambling in confusion, the panic worked its way through the line like a candle burning at both ends. It eventually reached the center, completely halting their march. Finally having noticed the human forces overhead responsible for all this, the demons began howling as they tried to scale the cliff face. But it was already well beyond the point that would do them any good.

“Leave behind the defenses for the mages! All cavalry, charge those damnable demons on the cliff! Mages, continue to rain fire on the front and rear of their formation! Let’s go!”

At Lefille’s command, her soldiers poured over the cliff’s edge like an avalanche. They spread out and attacked, creating a huge melee. And exactly as Lefille pictured, the mountain road was littered with the corpses of demons.



No matter how threatening a demon was to an individual human, it was obvious at a glance what kind of advantage an organized group of men had over the demons in complete disarray. And that was only accentuated in the narrow mountain path. Lefille and her troops kept close ranks and were on top of things, while the demons were even attacking their own in the smoke and chaos. They were self-destructively accelerating their own losses.

Meanwhile, Lefille was skillfully handling her horse on the narrow road as she scattered the surrounding demons. She would guide the reigns with one hand while hacking apart her foes with her sword in the other. Each and every demon who drew near, without exception,

fell prey to her large blade. But the ones who wouldn't dare approach grew in number as she demonstrated her fell strength, slowly forming a dense circle around her. In a constricted space like this, she couldn't unleash Gala Valner for fear of hurting her own allies. So instead...

"Oh red gale... Heed my will. Become our furious mantle."

As Lefille hummed those words like she was praying, a red wind wrapped around her horse as if it were donning armor. It tapered down its legs and wound in especially thick coils around its hooves. And then...

"YAH!"

Lefille shouted and spurred her horse, charging for the wall of demons without a hint of fear. She plowed right into them, and her red wind blew them away. The demons at the very front also had the pleasure of being crushed by the red wind coiled around the horse's hooves.

Right from the outset of the battle, she had taken the superior position. All that was left was to follow through and exterminate the rest of the demons as planned... Or so she thought. Just as she burst through the encirclement around her, a messenger came sliding down the hill. He didn't even wait to come to a stop before shouting out his emergency message.

"Shrine Maiden-dono! Demon reinforcements to the rear!"

But even as that frantic report reached her ears, Lefille remained calm.

"I see. So reinforcements have come... Do not lose yourselves, men! Follow the plan! We will rout the demons at the front and then retreat! I will lead the rearguard! Anyone who's up to the task, come with me!"

Their original plan had included a strategic retreat after the initial damage was done, so the men took to Lefille's orders without missing a beat. After they defeated the demons in front of them and secured a way out, the injured and exhausted soldiers would immediately make their exit. The mages that had remained up on the cliff would offer support and covering fire. And as soon as everything was in place, the retreat began in an orderly fashion.

While that was happening, Lefille made her way to the rear of her unit. The demon reinforcements should be coming into view any minute now... yet the winding, serpentine path behind them looked surprisingly clear.

"I see. From the sky, then..."

Lefille looked up to see a dark mass of something in front of the clouds. As Suimei would put it, they looked like the malignant winged spirits known as devils. And flapping those powerful, bat-like wings of theirs, they flew in like a bloody storm from above... For humans,

overhead was a natural blind spot, and a particularly troublesome position to be attacked from.

“Calm down, men! The enemy isn’t to be feared just because they’re coming from the sky!”

Lefille anticipated the soldiers’ unrest and raised a rallying cry. But she received no reply from them. In their stead came an extremely coquettish voice from directly overhead.

“Oh dear, is that what you think?”

Lust oozed from every sinful, dulcet syllable. Rather than a soldier on the battlefield, it sounded like a coaxing prostitute. Looking up, Lefille spotted the shadow of a demon. It had leathery bat-like wings like all the others around it, but the figure of a human woman. With soft, light brown hair fluttering in the wind, she was exquisite. The kind of woman men would line up to catch a glimpse of, and women would cast jealous glares upon.

She floated there in the air, leaned slightly forward, and played with her black tail. Lefille stared up at her darkly, for this demon was one that Lefille recognized. Indeed, it was one she would never forget. This she-demon was the very same who’d attacked her in Noshias. Calling her Lefille’s archenemy wouldn’t be an overstatement.

“You’re... that witch from back then!”

“Long time no see! How’ve you been, darling? My... I suppose if you’re trying this hard, then you’re really giving it your all, huh?”

Her taunting words and derisive giggle fanned the flames of Lefille’s rage. Just like back then, she was sneering at those who were trying their best to survive. And Lefille’s only answer to her frivolous question was a sharp red wind from the tip of her sword.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Lefille bellowed in a demonstration of her fighting spirit, and the red wind roared with her as it rose. Unerringly, it rushed up into the graying sky right towards the demon general leading the attacking army—Latora.

“Whoopsies! Careful there. It’s scary when you just suddenly attack like that.”

However, Latora dodged the slash meant to bisect her by a narrow margin. The red wind continued tearing through the air and blew away the demons behind her, but she didn’t seem to care in the slightest. All that came out of her mouth was sarcasm and condescension.

“...So you dodged it.”

“But of course, darling. Surely you know better—an attack like that would never hit me. Or are you underestimating me? Looking down on people is supposed to be *my* privilege.”

She spoke in a seductive tone as she licked her red lips. Seeing

just how casually her opponent was taking things, a fearful chill suddenly ran down Lefille's spine. Perhaps it was more accurate to call it disgust. But she shook it off nevertheless and glared into the skies. Latora then began smiling like she was in a great mood.

"My name is Latora. And from the look of it, you remember me well, don't you?"

"Of course I do! There's no way I could forget a witch like you!"

"Ah, for you to think that much of me... I'm thrilled! I've been anxiously awaiting my chance to see you again too, darling."

Those cruel words further fanned the flames of rage burning within Lefille. Her mind was consumed with memories of the humiliation bestowed upon her by this demon.

"Just how will I torment you the next time we meet?"

Unsatisfied by defeating just Lefille in combat, she'd gone on to slaughter Lefille's comrades. And rather than killing Lefille, she'd afflicted her with a wretched curse. What she'd done was unforgivable. Even if Lefille cut her into a thousand pieces right here and now, it still wouldn't make her feel better.

As if hailed by Lefille's overflowing anger, the red wind surrounding her became markedly stronger, like a swirling red fire. She was now fully amped for battle. But just then, a soldier's voice abruptly came calling from behind.

"Shrine Maiden-sama! The preparations for the rearguard and retreat are complete! Please prepare to retreat as well!"

"Don't worry about me! All of you go ahead!"

"But if we do that—"

"I must defeat this demon! For the sake of those who died in obscurity in this fight! And as I must do this, you must go on without me!"

As Lefille yelled her orders back to the soldier, he nodded in acknowledgement and passed the word along to the other men. The reason they didn't insist on staying as well was likely because they were soldiers of another nation. They were thinking of their own safety. Even if she was the fabled Shrine Maiden of Spirits, there was no reason they should have to put their lives on the line for a temporary commander.

And so, before long, the last of the imperial soldiers broke away and took off in the direction of the main encampment. The demons behind Latora took chase after them, but they were unable to overtake the rearguard, not to mention the main troop.

"Ah, there they go..."

"Hmph, your reinforcements were too late."

"Looks that way. At this rate, we won't catch up until they reach the main encampment, huh? Well, not that I really care... heehee..."

Sensing a hidden meaning behind Latora's sinister giggle, Lefille knit her brows. It was as if she didn't mind not being able to catch up with the imperial forces, and it made Lefille remember a certain sense of discomfort.

"Oh, darling, that look on your face tells me you don't get it at all. Heehee, allow me to explain. We don't particularly care if you lot run away or not. I mean, where they're running is just as bad."

"Wha—?! What do you mean by that?!"

"Nothing in particular. It just means you're all stupid; you'll meet the same fate either way. Did you really think we wouldn't see through your petty little human strategies? Ahahaha! You really are stupid, aren't you? Right about now, Lishbaum, Ilzarl, and Grallajearus should be launching a surprise attack on the main encampment your men are fleeing to, see?"

"A surprise attack on the main encampment?!"

"Yup. Completely unexpected, right? You thought you were stalling us, but in reality, we lured you out here and divided your forces. So even if your men are running from mine here, they're just jumping from the frying pan into the fire."

Lefille now fully understood what Latora meant. Everything about crossing through the rugged mountain range in the northern Empire was a setup. They'd used it as cover to deploy a detachment. And if that was true, it did indeed mean the demons were one step ahead this time. But even faced with such a reversal of fortune, Lefille looked emboldened.

"What's with that look on your face now? Do you think you can still win or something?"

"Of course I do. You said they were attacking the main encampment, but there's a hero and mages there to protect it, not to mention the Empire's elite. Even if they were caught in a surprise attack, they won't fall so easily."

"So you trust them? Well, whatever."

Latora gave an indifferent reply. It was like she seriously didn't care at all. But when Lefille raised her sword, Latora's apathetic expression became a sly grin.

"Heh, despite the miserable condition you were left in last time, you think you can beat me?"

"Of course I do! I won't fall behind like last time!"

"Well, it does look like you're a bit stronger than before, but is that enough to win? Hmm, I wonder..."

"I'll definitely win!"

Lefille returned Latora's derisive laughter with a shout. She called to her red wind, which wrapped itself around her like a dizzying red tornado. It was violent enough that it kicked up earth and rocks and

caught them in its vortex. And in response, Latora salaciously slid her finger through the air like she would across the lips a lover. When she did, what looked like threads sprung from the dark tip of her finger and fluttered in the wind.

Because Lefille had prior experience fighting her, she already knew that Latora manipulated the dark power of the demons in the shape of strings—strings that were elusive and ever-changing. Latora could bind opponents with them, and if she stretched them out over an area...

“Now then, for the first move...”

Latora repeated the technique over and over, layering the narrow mountain pass with a massive web of strings. They drilled into the ground and the cliff face, once, twice... She cast out more than ten layers of string around her. As Suimei would put it, it was a simplistic barrier. Just touching one of the threads might shred an opponent. No, considering Latora’s personality, they would likely ensnare the target.

To get to Latora now, Lefille would either have to cut down every last string or navigate her way through the gaps without letting them touch her. The former would be easier—if they were normal strings, that is. But Lefille knew Latora wouldn’t have put them up if they were so simple to overpower. Assuming they’d be impossible to cut through, her only remaining option was to slip her way through. The problem was that the gaps weren’t even half the size of Lefille’s body. Yet in spite of her apparent predicament...

“Do you really think I don’t have a way of breaking through this?!”

“Of course! These are strings I wove myself, you know? You won’t be cutting through them anytime soon!”

“In that case, all I have to do is slip through them!”

“What are you, stupid? No matter how nice that thin little figure of yours is, you can’t slip through that kind of— Huh? HUH?!”

Latora’s surprised voice echoed up and down the mountain trail. But that reaction was quite natural. She’d thought Lefille was going to do her best to crawl and stumble her way through the web of strings, but the moment she was about to touch them, she turned into a red wind and blew right through them.

“Wait, you couldn’t do that kinda thing before!”

Seeing this new technique of Lefille’s with her own eyes, Latora let out a yell close to a shriek. But the red wind didn’t hear her, or perhaps just didn’t care. It simply continued to blow through the maze of string, quickly closing in on her. It was fast and moved erratically this way and that, and eventually Latora’s eyes couldn’t keep up with it.

“Just ‘cause you can use that kinda technique...”

As Latora gripped, Lefille circled around to her back, seemed to flank her on either side, and then once more jumped out right in front of her. Latora hadn't expected an attack from straight on, and was late in reacting to the slash. Yet a demon general's power was nothing to be sneezed at. Even being attacked at point blank like that, she was just able to evade Lefille's blade by a hair's breadth.

"Hup, whoops, oh, whoopsies... Damn it!"

In order to escape Lefille's blade, however, she was forced to land. And her steps as she continued to evade Lefille's sword were like drunken staggering. She didn't seem accustomed to fighting on the ground, and her movements were decidedly unsubtle and awkward. But nevertheless, she managed to skate by. She continued to evade Lefille's long chain of deadly slashes and eventually seized the opportunity strike back, lashing out with her strings like a whip.

"How 'bout this?!"

Because the whip undulated in the air, it was difficult to deal with, but not impossible. In fact, Lefille had just seen Aerith Melfein of the Elite Twelve use a similar magical attack just the other day during the matches. She was ready for this.

"I said I wouldn't fall behind!"

"N-No way..."

There was single clap of thunder, a single slash of her enormous sword. It completely blew away the snake-like whip winding at her from the side. Indeed, the whip that Latora had conjured the first chance she got didn't last long at all. It was tragically obliterated by the red wind. And, using the momentum of her strike, Lefille leaped towards Latora herself. The kittenish grin Latora had been wearing up until now vanished, replaced by a look of stark panic on her face.

"Oh no, this is bad! I'm gonna lose— Not!"

Her panic was only a ruse. Perhaps the whole setup was, for Latora suddenly pulled a redheaded doll out of nowhere. At a glance, it resembled Lefille.

"What—"

Just as Lefille was about to ask what it was, she suddenly recalled the conversation she'd had with Suimei after he'd learned of her curse.

"We'll likely either have to take out whoever cast it on you, or do something about the intermediary used when it was cast on you. I don't think there's any other way to dispel it."

Back then he'd said that there had to be a medium for this kind of curse. In other words, an intermediary between the curse and the victim. Recalling that, a chill ran down Lefille's spine. This had to be it. The root cause of all her suffering. Latora's lips curled up into a wicked grin. An instant later, a feverish pain ran through Lefille's body. Unable to bear it, she stabbed her sword into the ground and

used it to support her as she fell to one knee.

“Ugh... Ah...”

“Ahahahaha! You really and truly are stupid! ‘I’ll definitely win’? Ha! There’s no way I would ever lose to you. I have my little friend here, you see? The very same one I used to place that curse on you!”

“Sh-Shit... This kind of...”

“What, you didn’t think I would have it? Rather, wasn’t it obvious that I would? Thinking that you had a second chance after losing so badly to me the first time is the epitome of stupidity, you know? Or is it that you just got so mad that you let your emotions blind you to all reason? Isn’t that a bigger problem than the fight itself?! Stupid, stupid, stupid! A blooming idiot, I tell you!”

“U-Ugh...”

Showered with such abuse, Lefille only grew angrier, more frustrated, and more humiliated. But racked with pain the way she was, she couldn’t do a thing about it. It was utterly vexing. But—either fortunately or unfortunately—Latora wasn’t closing in for the kill right away.

“Now then... I must say, that was all a lot easier than I thought it’d be.”

“What... are you... planning...?”

“Hmm? Isn’t it obvious that I’m gonna drag you like this all the way to your encampment and torment you? If I do it right in front of your companions and soldiers, don’t you think they’ll all despair? To see someone they relied on being teased so mercilessly... Tsk, tsk.”

Seeing Latora put her slender finger to her moist lips, Lefille was suddenly seized by a cold feeling. Her words brought a humiliating scene to mind: the mental image of being tormented in front of all her allies... as a miserable, pitiful warning.

“Damn it... Once again, I’m...”

Once more, she was forced to taste the bitter disgrace of defeat. She was going to lose. And when that realization set upon her, she couldn’t stop shaking. She was unable to control the frustration boiling up inside her. Then, a high-pitched laugh came down from on high. It was an evil laugh certainly befitting a demon. And as Lefille struggled to endure the feverish pain that racked her, trembling in anxiety and humiliation...

“What god-awful taste... My apologies—shitty bitch, isn’t it?”

Those foulmouthed words came down from the precipice of the cliff above.

“What—”

“Huh? Who are—”

“Up here.”

The mysterious arrival boldly declared her position. Guided by her

gentle yet dignified voice, Lefille looked up to see a single therianthrope clad in religious robes. She had pink, wavy hair, a gentle face, and two feline ears poking out from her habit. As for her identity, she was someone else Lefille would never forget.

“S-Sister Clarissa?! Wh-Why are you here?!”

“That is, of course, because I came to save you.”

Lefille could see her composed figure in the pale sunlight shining through the gray clouds behind her. And in a complete one-eighty, Clarissa took a wild leap off the cliff towards Lefille. She was just like a regal cat, and landed at the bottom of the ravine without a sound. Lefille beheld her with a suspicious gaze.

“You came to save me? What are you planning? Aren’t we your enemies?”

“Certainly not. We don’t think of you as our enemies, anyway. Rather, you’re would-be allies—comrades walking down a different path towards the same goal.”

“You’ve been feeding us nothing but evasive lies for a while now.”

Completely unfazed, Clarissa wore a boastful smile even as Lefille turned critical on her. She then smirked a bit before abruptly tightening her expression.

“I see... Then allow me to correct myself. We aren’t your allies; saving you is merely an afterthought. In truth, I have only come here to defeat the demons.”

Even if defeating the demons was why she’d really come, that still didn’t clear away all of Lefille’s doubt. In fact, it only raised more questions. If defeating the demons was what she and her group wanted to do, why were they kidnapping the heroes who were already doing that? It didn’t add up, and Lefille couldn’t decipher their true intentions from those conflicting actions. And so Lefille continued to regard Clarissa with suspicion, but she wasn’t the only one.

“Oh, and who’s this? Your friend?”

Feeling ignored, Latora cautiously asked Lefille about the identity of the interloper. In her stead, it was Clarissa who answered.

“For now, I will be accompanying her.”

“Hmph. I don’t really care, no matter how many friends come to your aid. It just means the number of people I get to torment increases! Now, more importantly...”

Latora paused for a moment and turned to look off in the direction the imperial soldiers had retreated.

“If you came from over there, you should have clashed with my troops.”

“Aah, if you’re talking about those fucking demon worms, they’re all drowning in a sea of blood, vomit, and shit right now.”

As Clarissa’s words grew more and more foul, Latora turned a

narrowed, vigilant gaze on her.

“...You’re saying they were all defeated? By you, no less?”

“Come now. It isn’t all that much of a feat, is it? Lefille-san here could have done the same thing.”

“Hmph. You mean to say that you’re strong?”

“More or less.”

Making an exceptionally boastful claim in a rather humble tone of voice, Clarissa began smearing pigments on her face. She clad herself in a ferocious mana. It was like the aura a wild beast unleashed when on the hunt—something that had given Lefille a great deal of trouble in their last fight. It grew, expanding and filling the air so thickly you could almost see it. And when it reached critical mass, Clarissa unmasked her true nature. Sharp, catlike claws extended from her fingertips and her upper canines protruded out over her lip. She had now completed the ritual. Tribalism—it was a school of magicka that granted power based on faith in ancient symbols. Seeing Clarissa literally transform, Latora’s face twitched.

“Ugeh! What is that?! People like you aren’t my type at all!”

“That’s a good thing. I’m not fond of opponents like you, either.”

With Clarissa’s last few words, a gust of wind blew through the area. No, it wasn’t wind. It was the embodiment of Clarissa’s bloodlust—in other words, an attack. A single cut appeared on Latora’s face. Glaring at Clarissa, she wiped the trickle of blood from her cheek.

“You’ve been acting awfully cocky for a while now... I’m seriously going to kill you.”

Latora’s own bloodlust and dark power swelled up. And then, in a way completely incomparable to when she was fighting Lefille, she gave concrete form to her fiendish power.

“What...? This much...”

Seeing the manifestation of Latora’s power, Lefille was dumbfounded.

“Oh, come on. I’m still one of the vanguards who attacked your country with Rajas, you know? Do me a favor and don’t lump me in with the stupid small fries like Vuishta and Mauhario.”

Lefille could only assume those were other demon generals. But the specifics of Latora’s taunting hardly concerned her right now.

“Ugh... S-Sister Clarissa...”

“Lefille-san, please take a rest over there. I’ll clean up this fucking trash.”

When the nun and the demon finished readying themselves for battle, a flash of light appeared between them as their mana and dark power collided, each struggling for supremacy. It would serve as the starting pistol to their fight.



And just around that time, the panicked voice of a messenger resounded through the main encampment.

“Enemies! W-We’re under attack!”

The flap at the entrance of the staff tent was violently thrown to the side, and the messenger dashed inside to convey the grim news. They’d been caught off guard. Hearing this, the high-ranking officers in the tent all simultaneously rose from their chairs. As the sky above the encampment was completely clear, it was perfectly fair to say this was a bolt out of the blue... but there was certainly something ominous on the horizon.

Reiji and the others who had yet to be deployed were also currently in the staff tent. The messenger’s news cut off Reiji and Reanat’s conversation, and the prince immediately confronted the messenger with a severe expression.

“We’re under attack?! Where from?!”

“From the rear, Your Highness!”

“The rear?! Impossible!”

Reanat was astonished at the messenger’s unbelievable answer. In an austere voice, he asked for further confirmation.

“Is that true, man? We should have heard word of the demons approaching from our scouts.”

“I’m afraid, Your Highness, that we’re dealing with a small, covert force...”

“Just what is going on...? Even if they make that sort of move here...”

Rather than being upset over being outwitted by the demons, Reanat was more concerned about the apparent incomprehensibility of their strategy itself. He continued murmuring to himself as he stared blankly at the messenger in wonder. It was Graziella who snapped him back to his sense.

“Elder Brother! Now is not the time to be dwelling on things! We must respond immediately!”

“Y-You’re right...”

Collecting himself, Reanat began giving out orders to all the generals and staff officers gathered inside the tent.

“I’m going!”

“Reiji-sama!”

“Reiji!”

While all this was unfolding, Reiji grew tired of waiting for instructions and dashed out of the tent. Chasing after him were the concerned voices of Titania and Graziella. Whether it was because he heard them or not, Reiji looked back at the tent as he drew his

orichalcum sword. His eyes were then drawn to the large cliff overlooking the encampment... and the mass of demons pouring over it.

A low shroud of dust was kicked up as they trampled over several of the tents and other structures in their way. Over the tumultuous racket they were making, Reiji could hear groaning and screaming. The demons had jumped down from the cliff without warning—and without looking. They'd crushed anyone unfortunate enough to be below them, and trampled anyone in their path moving forward.

Following after Reiji, Reanat and Graziella emerged from the staff tent.

“How wretched... Does this mean their main force was really just a decoy?”

“Elder Brother, please step back here. Take a unit with you and retreat to a safe location.”

“No, Lyla. With this, there is nowhere to retreat. We must defeat these demons, rally, and harden our defenses. Only then will there be safety. Call all of the Elite Twelve who remained here at the encampment!”

Reanat shook his head and declined Graziella's proposal. He then issued an order for the soldiers to assemble the Elite Twelve. It was customary for the army's leader to retreat under such dire circumstances. But instead of withdrawing and pulling away valuable manpower to act as his escort, Reanat decided it would be better to use those men to defend the encampment. They had the demons outnumbered, not to mention most of the Elite Twelve on their side, so it certainly seemed like the situation was salvageable.

However, the soldiers at the encampment were largely unprepared for battle. The surprise attack had come from behind, and no one was ready for it. It was clear as day that they were at a disadvantage here.

Thriving off of the chaos they were creating in the camp, the demons began to spread out in their mad rush. They trampled anything and everything in their path in a complete stampede. The soldiers could hardly take up arms, much less get into formation. It was only a matter of seconds before things broke out into an utter free-for-all melee. It was easy enough to distinguish human from demon, so there was very little worry about friendly fire. But that was only of minimal comfort right now.

“Burn Boost!”

As Reiji readied his orichalcum sword, he activated a quick chant to reinforce his body with magic. His physical abilities were already enhanced by the divine protection of the Goddess, but to turn these grim tables, he'd need to be even stronger. Flames coiled around his body like a fiery dragon, igniting his inner strength. This magic was

his strong point, and it made him even more effective in close combat. It was perhaps the ideal combination for Reiji, who had good instincts for battle.

Reiji didn't hesitate to make his way through the mass of confused soldiers and take his place on the front line against the demons. And he didn't hesitate to raise his sword against his foes. While the other soldiers were still in the midst of pandemonium, it would be bad to let the demons any further into the encampment. Until the troops could form up properly, he had to hold the enemy back on his own as best he could. If he left it to the soldiers as they were, the camp would be overrun in no time.

And so Reiji stepped up to the plate, cutting down demons one after another. Though the demons were physically stronger than humans, compared to Demon General Ilzarl, they were nothing to Reiji. He could handle them individually, no problem. However, being on the front line by himself, he was drastically outnumbered. If he lost focus even for a moment, that might be the end of him.

They're strong. They're certainly strong, but...

Every time he fought a demon, Reiji thought the same thing. They were certainly strong, but their strength was somehow lacking. The demons were tough and numerous, but they were out of control. Even if humans were the weaker species, there was still hope if they organized and banded together.

In the first place, demons were wild and reckless. They were disorganized and unclever, unlike humans who relied on strategy, schemes, and skill to attain victory. All the demons really had were their claws, fangs, and brute strength. They all attacked the same way. Just like now...

A demon swung its arm at Reiji, who deftly lopped its head off when it got close enough. Whenever he fought demons, it was always like this. Without exception. It was like they were robots programmed to perform predetermined commands. Every single one of them used the same attack. And that made them easy to fight. The demon in front of Reiji let out a gasping shriek as its head was severed from its body, and then it collapsed to the ground like a sack of potatoes and nothing more. That strength—the one thing they held over humanity—vanished so easily.

“HAH!”

Another demon came at Reiji—at the same speed and with the same attack. Reiji dodged to the side as usual. And, just like always, the demon's side was completely open. Reiji had no trouble stabbing through to its vitals. It was all perfectly routine. He was just repeating a pattern. It made things easy for him, but he couldn't help wondering...

Are these guys really capable of exterminating humankind?

Did they really think they could? Did they think they would win? Did they even have the conviction for that? No matter how many of them there were, were they even motivated? Some time ago back in Royal Castle Camellia, Suimei had said it was unreasonable to fight the demons. That there were so many of them, it was a fool's errand. But Suimei was fundamentally cautious by nature. No matter the situation, he was always calmly calculating the odds, and he would never pick a hand with low prospects for success.

But it seemed there'd been a reshuffling recently. Even Suimei, who had adamantly refused to take part in the war against the demons, was no longer backing down. In his own way, it was a statement of his confidence. That the odds were in their favor now. Reiji trusted Suimei's keen intuition and sharp senses implicitly. He'd never once lost at anything as far as Reiji knew. So if Suimei had joined the fight, it meant that this was a fight they could win.

Reiji didn't honestly know if the optimism blooming inside him was the power of the Goddess at work or not. But he knew for sure that this wasn't nearly enough to make him waver, capitulate, or fall into despair. It wasn't even close. So again, he couldn't help wondering...

Do they really, seriously think this is good enough?

They behaved so simplistically that Reiji wasn't sure they could change their ways even if they wanted to. It was a mystery to him. Why didn't the demons try to get stronger? Were they just lazy? Was it that they couldn't? Such thoughts brewed in Reiji's mind as he continued to swing his sword. He then heard what sounded like something dragging along the ground.

"There's still more...?"

The demons' surprise attack wasn't limited to a single wave, it seemed. When Reiji looked up, he spied more of them pouring over the precipice and sliding down the cliff face.

"Whatever! What I have to do hasn't changed!"

As Reiji firmed his resolve with a shout, he cut down the demon standing right in front of him—just like always. But then something unusual happened. Something that broke the typical pattern. He could sense someone behind him. No, not someone. That would imply it was a human, and Reiji's senses told him that it wasn't. He'd been so focused on the foes in front of him that he'd been negligent of his surroundings. He whipped around as fast as he could, but it wouldn't be fast enough.

After getting so complacent, this is what happens, huh?

Reiji thought the demons were simple and predictable. But in thinking that, he'd gotten careless. He'd left himself wide open like an

amateur.

“Urgh!”

He raised his sword to defend himself, knowing full well he wouldn’t make it in time.

But then two silver flashes flickered right before his eyes. It was the glimmer of lustrous blades intersecting as they quartered the demon threatening Reiji. The girl he could see on the other side of the demon as it fell to the ground was wearing a high-collared mantle that covered her mouth. Her ever-gentle eyes were now narrowed and sharpened like the point of a blade. They reflected the keen silver light of the swords in her hands. Indeed, Titania looked like she would cut down anyone who dared to touch her. But without even pausing to bask in the glory of her magnificent twofold strike, she turned her back to Reiji.

“Reiji-sama, leave your back to me. I will tidy up all the trifles here, so please swing your sword without worry.”

“Right! Thanks, Tia.”

Reiji gave his honest thanks to the gallant yet terrifying girl. She was reliable and steadfast. It was reassuring to have her as an ally. But that only made Reiji feel worse about himself.

Is this really what a hero is? Is it really alright for a hero to be like this?

In all his fights up until now, he was always the one being saved. He couldn’t count the number of times he’d fought fully focused on himself, unable to do a single thing for his comrades. He was aware of his lack of ability back in the imperial capital, and it was like he hadn’t progressed any since then. Did he really have the right to call himself a hero like this? As those doubts sapped away at his spirit and made him anxious, he felt a weight lean against his back.

“Reiji-sama.”

“Tia?”

“I am sure that you must have a great deal on your mind, but right now, please focus only on your sword. If you are to be a swordsman, you must become one with your blade.”

Even in the middle of mayhem, Titania’s clear and composed voice stood out. Hearing her remonstrate him for getting lost in idle thoughts, Reiji came to his senses.

“Mm, sorry. And thanks.”

As Reiji looked over his shoulder and thanked her once more, Titania didn’t give him her usual gentle smile, but a fearless one. It was proof that she knew what she was talking about, that she herself was one with her swords. This was Titania as a swordswoman, not as a princess.

“Let’s go.”

“Right.”

Now with Titania at his side, the duo moved deeper and deeper into the mass of demons, cutting their way towards the foot of the cliff where the demon commander inevitably would be. They were going for a decapitation strike. Reiji handled everything in front of them, and Titania everything behind. When they finally made their way to the destination, they saw it—a massive lump of flesh.

Seeing that utterly bizarre creature, Reiji’s footsteps unexpectedly came to a stop. Using a crushed tent as its throne, there was a mountain of skin overlooking the fray. Reiji couldn’t think of any other way to describe it. It was just a grotesque, fleshy mass. But it spoke as if it had been waiting for Reiji.

“Oh hero who is the apostle of the Goddess, our name is Grallajearus. To fulfill our longstanding desire of pleasing God Zekaraia and Demon Lord Nakshatra, we will have you fall here and die in obscurity.”

With a cacophonous voice like children screaming over each other, the mass of flesh made a pledge to kill the hero.



A little before Reiji and Titania encountered Grallajearus...

On a hill far away from the main encampment, two shadows stood at its apex, as if lording over the land like gods from on high. Yet one of those shadows let out a somehow dissatisfied sigh.

“To think a surprise attack would be so easily carried out...”

The sighing shadow was a beautiful man with copper chains wrapped around his body—Demon General Ilzarl. The shadow standing next to him was another demon general, Lishbaum, who replied to him in a somewhat cold tone.

“The only reason the strategy proved so effective is because of the target’s negligence. Because we have only been using straightforward frontal attacks before now, they likely assumed that we demons are like a savage, unintelligent tribe no better than wild boars.”

Lishbaum was right about the enemy army’s oversight, but Ilzarl still had his doubts.

“If you could have orchestrated this all along, then why didn’t you?”

“Naturally, to lure the enemy into a false sense of security. To make them think their strategies were working. When they think things are going their way, it makes them just that much more careless.”

Ilzarl had intended to return the accusation of oversight, but Lishbaum’s cold reply cut that short.

“Then it was to manipulate these offerings?”

“Yes. If we were to attack otherwise, they would have either intercepted the advance or, if they were lacking in numbers, stall for reinforcements. But as long as they believe they’re pulling one over on us, it’s easy to play into their preconceptions while a small force goes for the jugular. It’s a simple strategy, really. Lure out the enemy, and attack where they’re shorthanded. Anyone could have thought of it.”

“Hmph. And that’s what you set in motion?”

“This is a most satisfactory result, considering they’ll now be more vigilant concerning our actions in the future. If we can take out their main encampment, it will be even better.”

“I don’t think it balances out the damage done to us while waiting for your little plan to pan out.”

“Don’t be a fool. The exchange is perfectly balanced. No, we’ve come out ahead.”

Or so he said, but that math didn’t make sense to Ilzarl. He had his doubts about Lishbaum’s logic. Certainly, his plan had taken its toll on the enemy, but the losses they’d sustained to get there equaled that. So no matter how Ilzarl looked at it, it just didn’t add up. The humans had lost plenty of men in the surprise attack, but so too had the demons in the raid on their decoy forces in the mountains.

If they could crush the enemy’s main force, that would be a price worth paying, but the encampment they were going after was just a vanguard outpost. It was only there to buy time for reinforcements. Knowing they were about to face a much greater threat, the cost was too great.

“Will they really be able to take advantage of this? Rather, under current circumstances, isn’t it more likely that those guys will just flee?”

By “those guys,” Ilzarl meant Grallajearus and the force springing the surprise attack. They’d moved in a comparatively small group for stealth, meaning it would be easy enough to outnumber them. They were demons, so maybe even being outnumbered wouldn’t stop them. But—as someone who wasn’t really a demon himself—Ilzarl had sufficient reason to be concerned. And in response to his question, Lishbaum returned a cruel smile that even made Ilzarl’s blood run cold.

“And just what is the problem with that? Let them flee. For argument’s sake, let’s say they *are* annihilated. What do we care?”

Ilzarl had no idea where that answer had come from. The demons were all supposed to be completely focused on victory, but there was something sinister in Lishbaum’s smile that told Ilzarl his goals were different. He stared hard at Lishbaum for a time, and then once more looked over the flow of the battle with a bored expression.

“I didn’t think you were the kind of bastard to use tactics like

Vuishta.”

“You overestimate me. I’m no strategist. Not even close. All I know how to use are hackneyed tactics like this.”

“Are you serious? Aren’t nefarious tricks your damn specialty?”

As Ilzarl spoke with a hint of sarcasm, Lishbaum replied with a seemingly happy smile like he was being praised.

“Oh, no, certainly not. This is the extent of my trickery. Trapping an opponent or completely reading their movements would be near impossible. If I could do such a thing, then I really would be a crafty schemer. An outright master of subterfuge. But alas, sometimes sacrifices are simply necessary in battle. For an amateur strategist like me, calling this a plan might be far too impertinent. That’s why the most I can do is this level of petty trickery. But that’s fine, isn’t it? When it comes to offensives, we will have a countless number of opportunities, after all.”

As Lishbaum spoke of the lives of their demon subordinates like they were a complete afterthought, Ilzarl narrowed his eyes and glared at him.

“Lishbaum, just what the hell are you thinking?”

“Regarding that, if things proceed quickly, I will be able to tell you very soon— Oh my, but it seems they’re making a move now.”

Lishbaum’s gaze shifted focus as Reiji began cutting the demons with Titania at his back. And soon enough, he came to the mountain of flesh in his way. That mountain of flesh was something Ilzarl knew well.

“Grallajearus, you’re going to do it?”

“The hero is likely taking the maximum burden on the front line to reduce the stress on the soldiers. If the hero dies right there, then their morale will plummet irrecoverably.”

Just as Lishbaum said, the death of a hero would have a devastating effect. And for the demons, defeating the heroes was one of their highest priorities. It was a grand plan, but Ilzarl had a somewhat dissatisfied expression on his face.

“How unexpected for that hero to be here...”

“Was this something you could not foresee?”

“That hero still hasn’t gotten used to the power of the Goddess. The offerings around him are probably treating him precious and taking him out to grow stronger as he gets accustomed to his power. For him, this is a necessary step.”

“Certainly.”

“However, it seems those offerings do not yet understand just what a hero truly is. It’s somewhat premature to thrust him before Grallajearus.”

“Oho, then are you saying that the hero does not have even the

smallest chance of winning?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Grallajearus is a demon general, after all.”

The hero could never win here. Not only were his skills lacking, but the demon known as Grallajearus was particularly strong.

“So is that why you look disappointed? Because the meal that you purposely set aside for yourself is being snatched away?”

“Well, yeah.”

Back in the temple grotto in the self-governed state, Ilzarl had left Reiji because he was unripe. The power Ilzarl would gain from consuming him was insufficient. So he’d let him go in hopes of fattening him up for a future feast. But now that was being taken from him. The disappointment of having one’s favorite food stolen off of their plate after saving it for last was something anyone could understand. But while talking of such things, Lishbaum abruptly changed the subject.

“Ilzarl-dono, if I remember correctly, you gave that thing I had asked for to that hero, right?”

“That thing that you asked for? Oh, that. Hmph. Are you mad because I didn’t complete your little errand?”

“No, I do not particularly mind. I didn’t expect anything from you in the first place.”

Really, he didn’t expect anything from anyone. Ignoring the slight, Ilzarl expressed his skepticism.

“You don’t mind? Does that mean it isn’t all that much of a threat?”

“Goodness no. That... The Sacrament is something that could reach even the Evil God, just as I said before. That much is true. However, it is not so easy to use.”

“Even so, that man—the hero—was chosen by the Goddess, right?”

“That’s unrelated. Between being chosen by the Goddess and being accepted as worthy by the Sacrament... I needn’t even say which of the two is more difficult.”

Ilzarl raised an eyebrow, unsure of the meaning behind Lishbaum’s words. But he didn’t question him. The matter was inconsequential to him, after all. But Lishbaum explained nevertheless.

“The real question is whether that hero’s inner voice can be heard. If his thoughts can reach its very roots, or if that Lapis Judaicus answers him. The power he would obtain then would be...”

Lishbaum said nothing more after that. He only smiled faintly as he stifled a laugh before letting it out without reserve.

Chapter 4: So That I Can Be Myself

On that mountain of pale pink flesh, there were countless grotesque eyes, small arms, and legs. This was Demon General Grallajearus, who was neither humanoid nor bestial. It was just a lump of meat. That was the only way to describe it. It was like a tumor that had swollen up without ever being excised, and did nothing but continue to grow.

It was questionable to even conclude whether or not it was actually a demon, or any other kind of living creature, for that matter. And as long as the demon general stayed silent on the matter, there was no way of knowing.

“Oh pebbles of Isa!”

As Grallajearus’s voice rang out, Reiji and Titania could hear the sound of several objects piercing through the air as countless holes opened in Grallajearus’s body. Miniscule scraps of iron shot out like gunfire, propelled by a dark flash. In response to the attack, which they could barely follow with their eyes, Reiji and Titania had no choice but to run and evade. Faced with such a relentless attack, they didn’t even have an opening to fight back.

“Shit, we can’t get closer like this...”

If they did, they would fall prey to the projectiles. But it was also difficult for them to keep their distance. If they paused to try and look for an opening, the moment they stopped, they would be overwhelmed by the projectiles. Unable to advance and unable to withdraw, they were completely in a bind.

It was unclear how they needed to fight this opponent. Despite its sluggish appearance, there was no telling how agile it was, which only disadvantaged them further. It felt as if they were fighting several machine guns at once with an endless pool of ammunition. But since closing in wasn’t an option, they would just have to do their best to attack at range.

“Oh Earth! I beseech the solid lands! Turn thy pulsations into a violent tremor and gather below my feet! Exercise your authority, pierce through the air before me and rupture evil with this unavoidable stone! Grand Geyser!”

Reiji quickly chanted a spell of the earth attribute and unleashed his keyword with no delay. When he did, countless giant pillars shot up from the ground around Grallajearus and took aim at the lump of

flesh. Reiji didn't take the time to properly aim all the pillars, but there were enough of them covering a wide enough range that it didn't matter. The pillars tapered to a point and pierced Grallajearus. However...

"Did you really think this kind of haphazard attack would strike us down, hero?!"

As an unpleasant shriek reverberated like shrill noise in the air, Grallajearus's fleshy body began bubbling and swelling, filling in the damaged portions. By the time the pillars of earth wrought by Grand Geyser vanished, Grallajearus's body was right back to how it was before he'd been wounded.

"So this guy can regenerate...?"

Reiji muttered as the impatience tingling his spine grew stronger. The menace of something that could heal its wounds immediately stalled his judgment. He couldn't just carelessly swing at it, and any halfhearted attacks would surely be useless. He bit down on his lip, realizing he was at a loss for what to do. That was when Titania called out from behind him.

"Reiji-sama, I will take the front line for a moment. While the demon general is focused on me, go around and attack him."

"Got it."

After accepting her suggestion, Reiji distanced himself from Titania. Taking advantage of the fact that the demons were also steering clear of Grallajearus's attack, Reiji quickly began to circle around his target as Titania resolutely cut forward. She moved left and right, as if toying with her opponent, and Reiji felt like he was only seeing the optical illusion of her blurry afterimage. It appeared that, even with its many eyes, Grallajearus was also unable to keep up with her movements and shifted its focus entirely to her.

Everything was going well.

Confirming that the plan was working, Reiji circled around to Grallajearus's rear. Cutting down the demons in his path, he swung wide and ran up the cliff. He then spotted Titania retreating a great distance.

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

Judging that the timing was right, Reiji channeled his fighting spirit into a single slash. As his orichalcum blade thrust towards Grallajearus from behind, its oddly embedded eyes that had been focused on Titania suddenly shifted all at once and turned their collective gaze on Reiji.

"Urgh!"

Even its little arms and legs, as if following the movement of its eyes, began to squirm chaotically. And then the iron scraps shot out at him—the pebbles of Isa. In an attempt to escape the blast radius of the

buckshot, Reiji twisted his body and threw himself to the floor in a roll. However, even the direction he was rolling in was within the pebbles of Isa's range.

"Ugh, oh Earth! Surround me and become a firm bulwark! Absolutely none shall pass and threaten this life! Earth Wall Rising!"

Chanting a defensive spell, Reiji created a wall of earth with his mana as he laid on the ground. The wall, which was supposed to be able to defend him from any attack, fended off the first wave of the pebbles of Isa just as he planned. However, like with a machine gun, the bullets just kept coming. The wall of earth protected Reiji from the initial rounds, but the incessant iron scraps began to wear away at it. At this rate, it would only hold for a few more seconds. When Reiji realized that, he hurriedly stood back up to run away.

"What a relentless attack..."

"Do not underestimate us, hero! Did you think we would fall for such an infantile plan?!" Grallajearus angrily boomed at Reiji.

Reiji was left bewildered by their failed attack. Just how had Grallajearus done that? It was supposed to be entirely focused on Titania. He was certain all of its many eyes had been pointed towards her. It was as if, somehow, its organs were operating independently from one another. As if it were an existence made up of many beings.

"I see."

That was probably it.

"You're... a legion, aren't you?"

"That's right! We are an army of hundreds, and we are all one! We will not be destroyed by such narrow-minded attacks by you damnable humans!"

Grallajearus loudly shrieked in praise of its own being. At least it explained the mysterious way it referred to itself as "us." Its arms, legs, eyes, and odd lumps of meat were all independent of each other. And when it fired out the pebbles of Isa, it was a peerless opponent who was difficult to approach.

This is bad...

A bitter taste began to spread in Reiji's mouth. The fact that he was in a challenging fight with a demon general was one thing, but the demon army digging deeper into the encampment made it much worse. He couldn't take his sweet time with this one.

"Reiji-sama! For now, you should..."

"Ugh... Is this thing really too much of an opponent for me...?"

"Obviously. You will die in obscurity right here, you bastard. Die regretting the fact that you made light of us demons!"

And at Grallajearus's command, the demons in the area attacked. It looked like they were planning to surround and overwhelm Reiji. And to make matters worse, it was currently taking everything Reiji

and Titania had just to deal with Grallajearus alone. Graziella was busy protecting Reanat with the other members of the Elite Twelve, so she wasn't there to support them. At this rate, defeat would be inevitable.

"Tch... Tia, what should we do?"

"It is vital that we withdraw from here for now. The only choice is to break through the demons in the direction of our allies."

"But if we do that, we'll be leaving our backs open for the demon general."

"Yes. Therefore, I will serve as the rearguard. Reiji-sama, break out of the encirclement as fast as you can and regroup with our allies."

"I can't do that! If I do, Tia, you'll...!"

Unable to accept her plan, Reiji loudly refused Titania. However...

"It is alright. Reiji-sama, please believe in me."

"Tia..."

Reiji couldn't approve of using her as a shield and running away. But he couldn't think of any other means of getting out of this situation. As things were, both of them were going to die. Titania was simply proposing to shoulder that burden by herself. Reiji ground his teeth. Yet once again, he felt powerless. He had to be protected by his companions. And just as he was starting to think he might really have to accept this bitter dilemma...

"Oh Earth. I beseech the solid lands. Turn thy pulsations into a violent tremor and threaten all from beneath. Exercise your authority and become the foundation that supports all in existence. Pierce through the air, rupture evil, become an unavoidable stone and break through. Grand Geyser Refinement!"

A woman's voice rang in the air, and Reiji heard keywords he never had before. It was a spell far more powerful than the one he'd used earlier. Immediately following the keywords, the earth below protruded outwards. The spell Reiji had used created enormous sharpened pillars, but the magic manifesting now looked more like porcupine needles as large swords sprung diagonally from the ground.

The demons were shredded by the excessively dense cloud of blades, bringing them to a bloody and miserable end. Before long, the effect of the magic vanished, and the ground evened out to its original state. From the settling dust, a single girl stepped over the pile of demon corpses that now scattered the ground. It was none other than Io Kuzami.

"My goodness, do not look so tense when you are before me."

"Io Kuzami-san..."

"Indeed, oh fiancé of mine. The fact that you had forgotten about me is something I will later be questioning you about deeply, very

deeply—deeper than the Japan Trench. So stay put as you prepare yourself for that.”

As Io Kuzami thrust her index finger at him pointedly, she laid bare her dissatisfaction. Despite the situation being what it was, she carried herself in as carefree a manner as usual. However, in complete contrast to her attitude, the demon encirclement was still roaring and raging. The path she’d created to get to her allies had already filled back in.

“Io Kuzami-dono, please take care of Reiji-sama. I will take the rear and—”



“Like I’ve been saying, do not decide that it is a disadvantageous situation without me.”

“But at this rate...!”

As Titania persisted, Io Kuzami let out a grand sigh. It sounded like she was tired of them worrying about pointless matters.

“What kind of misunderstanding are you fools under? You are not the only ones fighting this battle. Do you really believe that you are the only strong ones present?”

“Huh?”

Bewildered by Io Kuzami’s words, Reiji inadvertently let slip a gasp of surprise. There were other strong people. So she said. But the only ones capable of breaking through here were himself, Titania, Io Kuzami, and Graziella. Reiji and Titania were hard-pressed, regardless of whether they advanced or retreated. Graziella and the Elite Twelve had their hands full with other matters. So the only one Titania could entrust protecting Reiji to was Io Kuzami.

Was there somebody else that could break them out of their predicament? While wondering about that, Reiji could suddenly feel a tremendous agitation of mana from the imperial side. He could feel it in his body and in the shaking earth. It felt just like the resonance one felt before a tremendous power was unleashed. Reiji wondered if it might be Graziella’s earth magic as an unnatural sound reverberated in the air despite there being no walls for the sound to bounce off of. It was a woman’s voice.

“Mana Furnace Core. White Fire, Immediate Critical Load!”

Her severe yet gentle mellifluous voice activated a few keywords, and immediately following that...

The agitated mana that had been shaking their surroundings swelled up explosively. A wave of mana blew against them, followed by an intense heat. It felt like the very sun had descended down towards the earth. Faced with the mixture of a shockwave and hot wind, Reiji, the others, and even the demons were completely forced to the ground.

And then, a cruel chill suddenly assaulted Reiji’s body. It was a similar sensation to when he heard a scary story, or when he went to supposedly haunted locations. A sensation that told him something bad was going to happen—a feeling most people got at least once in their lives. And everything that was making his body tremble amplified that cold sensation.

“Th-This is...?”

“Suimei? No, just who...?”

“Heh, I see. So that guy has drilled quite an extraordinary lesson into her. Though he’s always playing the fool, he certainly does not

miss a step. His little charade makes me quite envious, actually... to the point that it stimulates this curse of mine.”

Reiji and Titania were both bewildered. But Io Kuzami smiled boldly like she knew exactly what was going on. At the very least, she knew something. And the moment Reiji was about to ask her what it was, the next chant echoed in the air.

“Rain, oh rain. Oh hot, hot rain of fire that pours incessantly without exhausting my mysteries. Just like the white smoke of clouds and fog worn by the skies, cover the earth with a baptism of white fire that pardons no evil. Show not the mercy of compassion to those who disturb the world, to those who soil the world. And so, purify the lands and admonish them with the fires of judgment handed down from the heavens. Rainblaze Clouds.”

The keywords were “Rainblaze Clouds,” and those words alone made the nature of the spell quite apparent.

A large white magic circle stretched out across the ground, and mirroring it, another magic circle formed in the blue sky above. As they revolved in opposite directions, a white electric current crackled between them. When that current struck the clear sky, white clouds slowly took shape and swirled into a vortex.

The sky was gradually becoming cloudy. However, in complete contrast, the ground below was still as bright as day. As far as spells go, this one was slow to activate. To Reiji, it only looked like it was creating clouds. However, as he suspected, that wasn’t all there was to it. With a drip and a drop, tears began falling from the sky.

Rain began to douse the battlefield. Perhaps due to the white clouds covering the sky, the small raindrops looked like they were a cloudy white. They left thread-like trails behind them as they fell towards the demons, and only the demons.

But those droplets were not actually rain at all. They were plasma that gave off a white light. Indeed, it was raining white-hot fire. And as those deadly droplets came into contact with the demons, their bodies turned into a mass of white flames. Naturally, they had no way of resisting it. Even as they began to clad themselves in the dark power they used to resist magic, their bodies were left completely exposed to the rain. And as soon as it touched them, they were set aflame with white fire. When they tried to brush it off of themselves, it spread even more quickly to other demons around them. It all happened in the blink of an eye. The white fire spread out like a blaze in a dry field, and almost all of the nearby demons were annihilated.

“...”

Seeing such a disastrous scene, Reiji was at a complete loss for words. And at the same time, a freezing chill assaulted his spine. It wasn’t particularly because of the spell, either. The power of the

magic was certainly great, but that wasn't the true source of the fear he felt. Creating a large amount of clouds in the sky and bathing everything underneath it in white fire wasn't such an unusual feat for a spell. But as he looked overhead, the clouds hanging in the sky seemed to be spreading out. They soon overshadowed the entire camp.

And then it hit him. It was the scale of the spell that was so unbelievable.

Unsure as to whether or not he could call this phenomenon magic anymore, he was left speechless. Titania, who was standing next to him, was also quite surprised, as she narrowed her alert eyes. Io Kuzami was standing there with her brow knit in dissatisfaction. But as it turned out, they weren't the only ones to be caught off guard.

"Wh-What is this?! This magic... Magic of this kind of scale is impossible!"

The one to raise such a chorus of shock was Demon General Grallajearus. Even as a demon general, it was the first time it had seen this kind of magic. When it faced off against Reiji and Titania earlier, it was thoroughly composed. But not anymore. Right now, it was extremely perturbed. Before long, the caster of the spell finally approached the group through the white rain—Felmenia Stingray.

"To call something of this level impossible... That in itself is the definition of foolishness. There are only a small handful of things that are truly impossible in the world. What I have done is rather simple compared to those feats."

"This damn magic was your doing?!"

As Grallajearus raised its voice in disbelief, Felmenia quietly nodded. Grallajearus then questioned her more in bewilderment.

"What the hell are you?! If you're not a hero, how can you use so much power?! Are you really just a damn human?!"

"Well, regarding that... Just the other day, I resolved to take my leave of being one."

As Felmenia made that quiet, cold declaration, a sudden fearful chill ran up the backs of every single being present. She was taking her leave of being human... The one who was caught on those words the most was none other than the one who'd asked her about her humanity in the first place—Grallajearus.

"T-Take your leave, you say...? Are you saying you are a human who's stopped being a human...?"

"Regarding that, let's just say that it's of no concern to a demon."

"M-Making light of me..."

"By the way, is it fine to only focus on me? I'm not your only enemy here, am I?"

"What—?"

What followed after Grallajearus's confused voice was a hearty war cry.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

It was a rather masculine and violent cry, but the voice was that of a woman.

BOMPH!

Along with a deep, low-frequency sound which resounded in everyone's stomach, a mass of bodies flew into the sky above the circle of demons who were still being consumed by the white flames. Their bodies were gruesomely scattered into pieces from the shock of the strike.

Following that, the fence of burning demons was blown back by a shockwave. And beyond that fence was a girl carrying a gigantic halberd. She had bright blue hair and a small stature. She grimaced and shook her hand in the air as if she'd just touched something nasty. Her expression was definitely not one of someone who was fighting the sworn enemy of humanity. It was of someone who was driving away an unpleasant insect.

“Who is...”

As Titania was about to ask who it was, Felmenia answered before she could finish.



“Your Royal Highness, that is an ally. But do note that it is only a temporary one...”

“Temporary?”

“Well, yeah.”

The one to reply to Titania was the petite girl Felmenia called an ally. She must have heard their conversation. She then thrust her halberd towards Reiji and Titania.

“Yo, Hero of Salvation and Twilight Beheading Princess. The name’s Jillbert Griga. Just for today, I’ll be lending ya a teensy hand, alright? Ah, also, I won’t be answering annoying questions like ‘Why?’ or ‘What’s your aim?’ You got that? And that’s ’cause they’re all things there’s no point in you knowing! Now, take this!”

After declaring that, she once more swung her halberd and separated the axe blade from the shaft. Extending the chain that linked them together, she began to scatter the remaining demons in a circle around them.

Along with Felmenia’s magic, almost all the demons in the area were now defeated or left powerless. The only one gnashing their teeth in response to that was, naturally, Grallajearus.

“Th-That many, by just the two of you...”

“Hah! You’re naive for thinking you can just drag along a mishmash of these damn powerless pests! Don’t look down on humans, stupid! Idiot! Ah, but I’m a dwarf, though...”

“Besides, it is not just our power. There are the imperial soldiers here as well.”

As Felmenia glanced behind her, Graziella had already pulled together the soldiers, and they were exterminating the remaining demons.

“Everyone, show some spirit! We’re going to support Reiji!”

“HAH!”

As Graziella gave her orders, the imperial soldiers shouted back in unison. They were thrown into chaos and left at a disadvantage, but from the looks of it, they quickly rearranged their position and were now pushing back the ambush.

However, it could be said that what granted them a means of survival was, without a doubt, Felmenia’s magic. As Grallajearus also seemed to fully understand that fact, it fired off the pebbles of Isa towards her with rage.

“You damn little girl!”

“Oh barrier. Deploy.”

In response, Felmenia muttered out a chant. And immediately, a thick wall of mana appeared before her and obstructed the countless iron scraps sent flying by Grallajearus.

“A magic shield cannot stand before our pebbles of Isa!”

“Unfortunately for you, this is a barrier.”

“Nonsense!”

After that, the pebbles of Isa poured out relentlessly, but the barrier put up by Felmenia didn't falter. Despite the fact that the wall of earth Reiji used crumbled in an instant, Felmenia had, with a far shorter chant, using a spell he had never heard before, and with no keyword, created a shield that could withstand it.

Before long, Grallajearus could tell that the pebbles of Isa would not work, and stopped the barrage. And as he did, Felmenia's barrier also vanished.

“Demon general. That sort of attack will not work on me. Resign yourself.”

“Gu...! This kind of...”

Felmenia further increased the mana clad around her and threatened the demon with overwhelming pressure. Seeing her like that, Titania let out her admiration with a smile.

“As expected, White Flame-dono is quite reliable.”

“N-No, it wasn't much...”

In a complete change from her dreadful aura just now, Felmenia began to feel embarrassed. Her expression crumbled before the praise and admiration from the princess of her own country. However the mana she was accumulating remained the same, and she didn't show any signs of carelessness. Before long, Graziella had finished cleaning up the remaining demons and joined up with them.

“Is all that's left that monster?”

“Yes. A demon general that called itself Grallajearus.”

Titania answered her. Perhaps because of the battle, her tone was somewhat gloomy, but Graziella responded with a fearless laugh.

“With this much power gathered together, it doesn't matter if it's a demon general...”

“Your Imperial Highness, it is still dangerous to be so careless.”

“I know that much without you telling me. Right, Reiji... Reiji?”

Though Graziella called out to him, Reiji didn't respond. And as she was baffled by his unexpected behavior, Reiji suddenly stepped towards Grallajearus.

“Reiji-sama?!”

“Hey! What are you being so impudent for?!”

The two princesses began panicking as Reiji stepped in on his own. Though they tried to restrain him as they called out, Reiji did not turn to look at them.

“I will defeat this guy on my own. I want all of you to stay out of it.”

“But Reiji-sama—”

“I have to do this on my own.”

Reiji ignored Titania’s voice. He had to do it himself. His resolve was the result of how the tide of this battle had gone. Because he felt worthless for having decided to cast away Titania as a sacrifice so he could flee. In order to climb over this wall, he had to do this on his own.

Despite seeing his determined silhouette, Titania still insisted on stopping him. But before she could, Jillbert thrust out her halberd to stop her.

“Let him do it. Everyone feels like they got to do it themselves once in a while.”

“What are you...?”

“It’s a ritual. For a man to become a warrior, right? You’re also one of those types, aren’t you?”

Saying that, Jillbert winked and smiled at Titania. It was true that one had to stand firm to become a warrior, so Titania was unable to say anything back. As Reiji stepped forward on his path to becoming a man, Grallajearus started making an uproar.

“You’ll defeat us all on your own, you say? It was already proven that your pitiful power is not enough to defeat us! Are you touched in the head?!”

“I haven’t gone crazy or anything. It’s just because... this is what I must do. So I will do it.”

“Don’t get carried away, you damn brat! Have you mistaken the power given to you by the goddess as your own strength?!”

“I know full well that this is a temporary power that I was given. That’s why... That’s exactly why! I need to surpass my limits!”

“Are you saying we’re your damn stepping stone or something?!”

“That’s right! I will defeat you and step over that boundary!”

With a roar, Reiji advanced towards Grallajearus. As he screamed, he dashed forward for the sake of surpassing that wall. As he drew closer, the pebbles of Isa were fired out in a flash. And Reiji began evading them as he circled around Grallajearus.

“After howling so vigorously, is all you can do evade, HEROOOOO?!”

“Ugh...”

A pebble of Isa grazed Reiji’s face and left a cut on his cheek. He stepped forward with conviction, but as if he was being toyed with, it took all his effort just to keep moving. He couldn’t spot any opening in which to attack, let alone to attain victory. No, that kind of thing never existed in the first place. With just the fact that he had rushed into a hard fight, any hope of victory had been wiped out.

But even so, Reiji had to climb that wall. Even if it was reckless, even if it was foolish. He was pushed back by Rajas, Elliot took it easy

on him, he was completely subdued by Ilzarl... Even here and now, he was completely outclassed. He couldn't just resign himself to being such a half-baked hero from here on out.

That was because he had companions he could rely on. Even now, they were behind him, calling out to him in concern. Let's cooperate and defeat it. Don't be reckless. All he heard were kind voices.

He was always being saved like that by someone. But was that really what a hero was? Was it really okay for him to call himself a hero like that? Without saving anyone, while only being saved himself? Only to be placed on a pedestal and carried above others like a buffoon?

He could not accept that. Ever. Being a flashy showpiece and nothing more held no meaning. There was no way he could accept such deception.

"I won't lose!"

"For the sake of the Goddess?! Or perhaps for the sake of the people?!"

"Wrong! It has nothing to do with heroes, goddesses, or the people of this world! It's all for myself!"

That was why. That was exactly why. The time to take a great stride was now. Up until now, he remained the same and took advantage of the good will of his companions. But it was time to separate himself from that dependence.

Even if he couldn't fly, as long as he never took the leap on his own, he would never learn it for himself. That was why he had to step forward now. That was why—

"I will... I will become stronger! I want to become stronger!"

His thoughts, his desires, he yelled them all at himself, and just at that time...

If you desire it, then request it and call out.

"Huh...?"

The final gate that connects to a great power at all times exists within you.

"Wh-Who..."

As a robotic pronouncement suddenly resounded in his head, Reiji unexpectedly raised his voice to question it. And when he realized this, he was standing all alone in the middle of a mud-like darkness.

"Wh-What? Where? Wh-Why...?"

As a baffling situation presented itself around him, Reiji was seized by surprise. He was definitely in the military encampment of the imperial army, and was right in front of Grallajearus. And in spite of that, he couldn't see those things anywhere. They were nowhere to be found. Everywhere he looked, there was only darkness, and something which looked like a light far in the distance.

However, all of that was gone in a flash. That was because the small light in the depths of the darkness became bluer and bluer...

“Ah...”

As if entranced by the distant sparkling blue light, an enraptured voice came out of his mouth without him realizing. His mind was the same as that enraptured voice, simply dumbfounded. That passion with which he was denying himself as he yelled was wiped away, and all that remained was that blue light.

He had seen that light before. It was none other than the light given off by the gem installed in the Sacrament.

And in that instant, he suddenly understood. That light was something that he had to head towards no matter what. Beyond that light, the answer to everything was awaiting him.

That’s why he broke into a run. He ran and ran, with all his strength to grasp that blue light.

And immediately, words appeared in his head. A voice with no voice, and that was...

By my Lapis’s blue brilliance, crystallize the sword spirit.

And as those words repeated, the blue light grew stronger. And as that light spread, it gathered in his hand—but before he could hear the last words, the dazzling light vanished.

When he came to, that tunnel of darkness and the blue light were no longer there, and the scenery returned to that of the imperial military encampment. And before his eyes, Grallajearus was sneering.

“Hmph. Just as I was wondering what you were doing, all that did was give off a bit of light.”

“...”

If it was as it said, Reiji was likely giving off a blue light just now. In his right hand, he was suddenly gripping the Ishar Cluster. He had unconsciously grabbed it, or perhaps the blue light he was grasping was, in fact, the Sacrament itself.

As the Sacrament continued to give off a pale light, it was like he was staring at the trailing memory of that blue light. If it was just as Grallajearus said, all it did was give off light. He was probably just standing there as a blue light overflowed from his hand. As proof of that, unlike the time he fought Ilzarl, the Sacrament didn’t turn into a weapon. Because he couldn’t hear those last words to manifest the weapon, this was only a natural deduction.

However, even so, he was still able to grasp that blue light. He could see the path. He could see the door. He could hear the mysteries of that blue light, the voice with no voice. Therefore, the amount of power he grasped—it wasn’t zero.

“Wha—?!”

Grasping his orichalcum sword once more, he moved with the

same speed which overwhelmed Ilzarl, and he could hear a chorus of shock in front of him. It was likely that it looked like he had vanished before its many eyes.

This demon general wasn't stronger than Ilzarl. In every respect, it was inferior. It was remarkably inferior. If Reiji was going to lose against such an opponent, his suffering from this point would be unfathomable. That was why—

The number of times he could deceive its eyes was only this once. Winning against an enemy like this from straight on was truly a victory suitable of praise.

“...”

One step. With one step, in complete silence, he swung his orichalcum sword. Repelling the pebbles, which flew like bullets. Trampling the earth under his feet. With that tenacious single step, his boot sank into the ground, and the ground around his boot swelled up like goosebumps.

“...”

As he drew close, Grallajearus's voice couldn't be heard. He could no longer hear anything. It was raising an uproar, but Reiji no longer perceived it as sound. Its words of disbelief and protest didn't even reach his ears. His blood had run cold from being pushed back by this opponent only a moment ago, but now Reiji understood the ultimate reality. However, there was not a particle of happiness in him. He did not step forward in order to gain a sense of superiority.

The demon general was only a few more steps away. It was in range, if he thrust out his sword. At that distance, the demon general abandoned hope and poorly fired out the pebbles of Isa in desperation. But it was too slow. Before they were even fired, Reiji could see through all of it, and the march to victory was determined before it even began. As he drew closer with his sword at the ready, Grallajearus screamed.

“We are legion! Know that an attack from a sword is meaningless before us!”

He could hear angry voices. No, there was a small amount of bluffing mixed in. Having fallen into an inferior position, it relied on bravado to cheer itself on. Like it had declared, the fact that it was an army was a nuisance. However.

“Is that so?”

“What?”

“Even if you are a legion, the fact that you share a single consciousness means that there must be some sort of source which houses that consciousness. If there wasn't, you would just be a disconnected mess of chaos. Isn't that right?”

As the truth was revealed before it, Grallajearus's voice became

filled with panic.

“Wh-Why do you... Why do you know that?!”

“Light...”

“What?”

“That blue light told me.”

What gave him that idea was the blue light. When he touched that blue light, the voice with no voice whispered it to him. ‘That is definitely an opponent you can defeat...’

And so, as Reiji unerringly swung downwards, he slashed apart the small vital core deep within Grallajearus.



Around the same time that Reiji and Titania’s fight against Grallajearus and Lefille’s fight with Latora started...

After distancing himself from the main encampment, Suimei was clashing with demons about halfway to Lefille’s position.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore.”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician’s resentment.]

Following his chant, Suimei unleashed Ashurbanipal’s flame upon the swarm of incoming demons. Based on a curse from Assyrian legend, it was fire magicka that was remarkably efficient against living creatures. At the start of the chant, it formed several small magicka circles at odd intervals in the air. And as the chant progressed, a sphere of fire formed in the center of them all. It burned like it had a shining stone at its core, and was obviously no normal fire. Dense flames then shot out of the smaller magicka circles to incinerate their targets. A conflagration danced its way through the crowd of demons. The demons caught in it were denied the chance to even scream before they crumbled to the ground as ash.

So even if he was outnumbered, Suimei clearly wasn’t hurting for firepower. Yet nevertheless, the demons didn’t falter in their charge towards him. It was like they were machines that knew nothing of adaptability, devoted to one single pre-programmed command.

Suimei was currently moving against the demon army on his own. His plan was more or less “search and destroy.” A few days had passed since the test matches at the encampment, and after the imperial army had established its foothold in this battle, Reiji’s companions were finally allowed to join the fight. In a private conversation with Reanat, Suimei had asked if there were demons traveling along any paths that weren’t booby trapped. Reanat had said there were, so Suimei had asked to take care of those. Of course, since he was working alone, he’d added the caveat, “To the extent that I can.”

“Originally, I planned to get paid for this, but it isn’t too bad if I think of it as doing a favor to lessen the burden on Lefille and Reiji,

really.”

Before heading out, Suimei had made that declaration at the encampment. In his world, the work of magicians came at a high price, so it was perfectly natural for him to think about compensation when lending a hand. But this time, there were also his companions to think about, as well as the fact that he was being supplied with food and any other provisions he needed. In light of that, he tried to think of this as an exchange of sorts.

Of course, he also thought it would be perfectly reasonable if he didn't stick his neck out at all. For the time being, in order to keep Reiji from suspecting anything, he was supposedly assisting Lefille's unit. He'd departed with them, but then parted ways with them in order to move on his own.

Spreading out a map and confirming the position of the stars, he determined where he was and where the units sent out to stall the demons were. Avoiding them and the paths that the imperial troops were using, he strengthened his body with magicka and made his way through the treacherous mountain terrain, practically skipping and humming until he came across a force of demons.

There were easily two hundred of them, all of which were moving on foot. An infantry unit, it seemed, advancing through the forest in a single clump. Mowing down trees as they pressed forward like they owned the place, they looked just like a giant caterpillar devouring a leaf as it moved across it.

And unlike the mostly humanoid demons that so often appeared in fantasy stories, these were much closer to beasts and insects. They had large builds twice the size of even the tallest basketball players. They had exoskeletons covered in pitch black cuticle, which looked as hard as rock. Like they were talking amongst themselves, their spidery mandibles were clattering ominously.

“Ugeh...”

They inspired an unrivaled feeling of revulsion in Suimei. Compared to them, the demons he'd met before were much easier on the eyes. Their external appearance was much more put together than these creepy ones. Suimei found them absolutely revolting and unconsciously expressed his disgust with a groan. But now that he'd found them, he had to do something about them. He was at the crossroads of deciding how to proceed.

Should he annihilate them? Or should he just deal a devastating blow to the group and then retreat? With this many of them, two or three grand magickas would take care of the whole lot. But thinking about it from the perspective of the strategy the Empire was putting into play, it would be fine if he didn't go that far. All he really had to do was stall them and, if the circumstances permitted, take a few of

them out before reporting back. However...

Considering what's to come...

Suimei's sudden anxiety wasn't about the fight before him, but about himself. He had no misgivings about throwing down with the demons, but right now, they weren't the only shadow looming over him.

His biggest concern was the Universal Apostles, Eanru's group led by the mirage man. He genuinely and truly considered them a serious threat. There was Eanru's sheer physical strength, not to mention the talent the mirage man had displayed with his magicka. Thinking about his inevitable conflict with them, Suimei knew he had to fight and grow stronger. Next time, he wanted to be able to stand up to them.

"That's why... Well, I know I need to sharpen my battle senses, but..."

It just seemed like a poor plan to simply throw himself into the middle of a demon army for that. A magician had to fight like a magician. There was nothing to be gained from recklessly rushing into battle. Moreover, the goal he was chasing was vague.

But, with things as they stood, he felt pressured to take on this reckless, vague challenge. He wasn't happy with the way he was, and he wanted to change that. If he simply stood still, the day would again come where he would be smeared across the earth.

Reaffirming the determination in his heart, Suimei jumped out from the shadow of a tree. The demons immediately raised their ear-grating voices as they rushed towards him. They wanted to tear apart his weak human body with their claws and sharp insectoid mouthpieces.

But it wasn't just their strength they were relying on. What made them the most dangerous was the dark power surrounding their bodies. It was like a mysterious, sinister aura. Different from the negative powers behind dark magic, it was the power that drew from the Evil God as a source. If someone who didn't possess the Goddess's protection took a blow from that to their bare flesh, it wouldn't end with a simple wound.

"However..."

However, just what was there that he had to fear about that? Certainly, the Evil God's power was astounding. Almost all deific power was. But compared to all of the other fights he'd been through before this day, it didn't scare him. He'd fought far worse, and frequently, at that.

Naturally, those were fights against wielders of mystical powers. But really, it could be said that even the most common fights in his world surpassed those here. In the modern world, almost all fighting

was carried out with technology and military tactics that made full use of it. Machine guns that could fire a hail of bullets. Anti-tank grenades like the RPG-7 that granted a single human terrifying destructive potential. Flying at mach 2, anti-ship missiles that could accurately strike from two kilometers away, not to mention the missile cruisers that housed them. Assault helicopters like the Super Hind that could gun down humans from the sky.

Remembering his fights against such things, just how could fighting against demons even compare? Recalling fighting opponents with attacks that came in near the speed of sound from unknown locations, the threat of an attack he could see right in front of him was nearly laughable. He could probably handle this with one hand tied behind his back, if not both.

Dodging the strike coming straight at him from the front and defending against the claws swinging in from the side with *magicka*, he returned the attack with fire *magicka*. As the rest of the demons closed in, he blew away the ground beneath them as he jumped into the air.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore. Parito collocatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox.”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician's resentment. Give form to death's agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

Under the clear blue sky, Suimei's chant brought about a burst of fire in the forest. White smoke from all the incinerated demon flesh rose into the air, and the earth was bathed in red. It was like the scenery of a nightmare. Below that refreshing blue sky that would calm anybody's heart, a banquet of burning hell was unfolding. That impression didn't seem to change no matter how many times he witnessed it. Knitting his brow at the screams and carnage, Suimei indulged himself in idle thoughts for a moment.

In any case, what does it mean that the demons move in such monotonous, predictable ways?

What came to mind was something he'd been curious about for quite a while now. From what Suimei had seen to date, the demons fought using the singular strategy of trying to push straight into human territory. Even when Vuishta caught Hatsumi in his scheme, the main force of the demon army was still just charging straight forward in a frontal attack.

The demons would take up formations with tactless simplicity, but they hardly relied on strategy. Their only tactics were to move forward using brute force to overcome. It was arguably an effective tactic considering their numbers, but that effectiveness dropped off dramatically when opposed—which the demons constantly were. To

battle them, the people of this world wielded magic and cooperation. They even summoned heroes from other worlds. And that was why, up until now, the demons had always been kept at bay, exiled to their own corner of the world. They were mounting a considerable offensive now, yet they still single-mindedly attacked with such simple honesty.

It's almost like...

Yes, it was like they were saying that they wanted to be killed. In spite of the fact that their opponents took countermeasures against them, all they did was wield the same old-fashioned fossil of a fighting style they always had. It was like they were rushing towards their own deaths.

Suimei incidentally recalled the famous hoax involving animals that committed mass suicide. It was anecdotally said that lemmings would strangely form groups and, one after the other, throw themselves off cliffs into the ocean to drown. This didn't actually happen, of course, but it's what he felt like he was watching.

Unless the demons' attacks are so monotonous in order to lure their opponents into carelessness... But there's no payoff to that. The stages they could put that to use in are severely limited, and it's not like losing all these small battles is going to secretly win them the war. I may just be overthinking things, or perhaps their goal is something else altogether...

While fighting back the demons, Suimei gradually fell yet deeper into thought. The way he saw it, it was entirely possible that the main demon force attacking the Empire was a decoy, and another force was sneaking under their noses to attack a different location. Since the demons were now active in the Empire and the Alliance, if a detachment was dispatched, it would likely be headed for Astel. But the losses they were taking to do that seemed to outweigh any possible benefit they would reap from it.

Certainly, during the chaos when Astel was forced to accept refugees from other fallen nations to the north, it was the right time to attack, but still... It would be extending their forces far too much. A detachment like that would also be out of the reach of their supply line.

Just what *were* they planning? No, maybe there wasn't anything in particular at all. Falling deeper into thought, Suimei grew a little slow, and the encirclement of demons around him grew thicker. Their annoying chattering interrupted his train of thought, however, so Suimei began a chant to shut them up. But before he could finish it, the entire mob of demons was blown away.

It was like they were grasped by a gigantic invisible hand and crushed. And then Suimei saw it happen for himself. He spotted three glassy spheres of mana that reflected the images of demons within

them. Tolerating no resistance, it mercilessly crushed them. Suimei turned around and glared at the man who'd appeared behind him, firing off a pointed question with a sharp tongue.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing. They were gathered in such a nice formation, so I took care of them."

The man Suimei turned to had silver horns and was standing in the middle of a pool of demon blood and meat. He wore white vestments similar to traditional Japanese clothing that left his chest exposed. He had a glossy, black rosary-like necklace hanging around his neck. His face always wore the same fearless smile, like he found everything in the world to his pleasure and intended to spread that cheer. It was almost uncanny seeing him standing in the bloodbath of his own making like that. He was like the very avatar of battle—the dragonnewt of the Universal Apostles, Eanru.

Stifling a laugh, Eanru drew nearer. He didn't seem to see the demons around him. Or perhaps he just didn't care. It was like he was blind to any sense of danger, but Suimei was the same way.

"I think it's a little early for a rematch though..."

"What are you saying? There's no early or late when it comes to fighting, right? As long there are two opponents, whether it be at the ends of the earth or the end of time, they're destined to fight wherever they meet."

"To turn a reunion into a fight... Are you a member of the Maeda clan or something?"

Suimei sighed in exasperation, and Eanru unfurled his bloodlust to get him to change his tune. Even surrounded by an enemy army, he was seriously preparing himself for a rematch. It was true that their conflict had no set time and place. But even so, getting into it here and now was far too capricious.

Though for a battle-dominating dragonnewt, even concerns like environment were but trifling matters. Demons were a dime a dozen to him, and certainly wouldn't get in the way while he was fighting Suimei. And even Suimei was staring to think the same. The moment rivals encountered each other, any stage could be an arena.

The atmosphere gradually began screaming. The demons who weren't stopped by Suimei's flames were no longer moving. They were beings who knew nothing of fear, but between Suimei's mana and Eanru's fighting spirit clashing against each other, they were physically bound in place.



But all of a sudden, Eanru's fearless smile vanished.

"Haha, I was kidding. I was just kidding. As I thought, there are many useless things that come up upon meeting you."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing. It just means I didn't come here today to fight with you."

"Then—"

"Listen, today I came here to defeat these damn pests. And I incidentally just so happened to run into you along the way."

"Incidentally?"

"Yes, incidentally."

"You came all the way here just to defeat these small fries?"

"The real show comes after this. This is just the opening act."

"In other words, a demon general or something is coming, huh? Abducting heroes then fighting demons... What you guys are doing makes no sense, you know?"

"That would only be from your point of view. From ours, for the time being, it makes perfect sense."

Eanru ultimately gave a non-answer. Suimei understood that he was here to destroy the demons, but didn't understand why. Moreover, if he didn't want to fight Suimei, why had he made contact in the first place?

"So, what do you really want?"

"You are also here to defeat these damn pests, correct? I just thought it would go faster if we did so together."

"You're saying since our goals are the same, we should cooperate? I don't have any intention of getting along, you know?"

"Likewise. If we get along too well, it would only become a hindrance during our rematch, after all."

"You seriously only care about crap like that, huh?"

"So?"

Eanru's tone had completely changed. He was asking whether or not Suimei would go along with his suggestion. Eanru was his enemy, but he also wasn't the scheming type. He sought pure, unadulterated battle. He would even cast aside his alleged duties to get it. That was just the kind of guy he was.

If Suimei refused, it would prove a poor move to have their fights overlap. There was no need to deliberately increase the number of his opponents. And since it was Suimei's main goal to defeat the demons, it really wouldn't hurt to have an extra hand. But if they fought together here, he'd end up revealing some of the cards he had stashed up his sleeve... No, that was true for both of them. And in that sense, they'd still be on a level playing field, so there was no point in

refusing.

“...You’re on.”

“Then it’s decided. Just for now, I will entrust my back to you.”

Suimei nodded. And without another word, they turned their backs to each other and turned their previously clashing mana and fighting spirit on the demons surrounding them. In an unexpected turn of events, Suimei had formed a temporary alliance with a dragonnewt.

And it was an utter massacre. Neither of them had felt in danger in the first place, but now that they were working together, they were additionally relieved of the burden of watching their backs, leaving them to focus solely on the fight in front of them.

Using magicka, Suimei reduced the demons to ashes. But right behind him, double the amount of demons were obliterated by Eanru’s fist. There wasn’t even the slightest chance they could lose. Up against such a measly gang of demons, the fight would be over in a flash. When he realized this, Eanru moved to taking care of the demons flanking them. His eyes glimmered, and each and every demon he was glaring at was crushed in an instant.

“Tch, the draconic eye...”

It was the technique that had defeated the demons surrounding Suimei earlier. Among all techniques that caused harm using only one’s gaze, it was the easiest to imagine. The Evil Eye. In the world of magicka, it was one of the most simple and ancient techniques there was. It was originally a type of curse inflicted by an envious or jealous glare... Though obviously, what Eanru was using didn’t share that origin, but there was no mistaking it was an astounding attack. And it was hard to even recognize as an attack, making it even easier to fall prey to it. After wiping out a large number of the demons, Eanru suddenly smiled.

“What are you laughing at now?”

“Nothing. It’s just, even with such worthless pests as opponents, slaughtering them while standing shoulder to shoulder with someone strong is unexpectedly exhilarating. That’s all.”

“Hah?”

“Truly unexpected. Despite fighting for several decades, to think the day would come where I felt this way... Even small fries have a use in their own little way, it seems.”

Suimei had no idea what he was talking about. Perhaps this was like a game to him to see who could defeat more demons. Yeah, it was a lot like chaining moves in puzzle games. Eanru wasn’t sadistic; he was just having fun. Destroying these bugs was like lining up the perfect combo and seeing all the pieces disappear from the board. Pure satisfaction.



Dominating the sky was a swarm of demons. Like a large flock of black swans, they painted it black as they moved en masse. Demon General Striga was in the lead, guiding his kin through the skies as he led them straight south.

“‘The human armies cannot ambush the skies, thus, I would like you to charge straight in,’ was it? Hmph.”

Flapping his wings as he moved along, he discontentedly muttered about the order Lishbaum had passed down to him.

“It is likely that in this battle, the human armies will fully expect and believe a simplistic strategy from us. Using that against them, myself, Ilzarl-dono, and Grallajearus-dono will unleash a surprise attack on their main camp, so I would like Latora-dono and Striga-dono to serve as decoys. That way, we will be able to deal a severe blow to the human army and defeat them easily.”

That was the summation of their war council before they went their separate ways, and it was certainly as Lishbaum said. If they were able to outwit the human army, they could expect to deal a serious blow. Their main encampment would become a mass grave. The real question was simply whether or not the humans they were launching this surprise attack on were worth going to such lengths for.

“Forget strategy against the humans! Isn’t it fine to just trample them underfoot? Just what is that guy afraid of from these maggots?”

Tactics like this should be reserved for opponents that required such measures. It was true that sometimes a bit of intellectual power was needed when brute strength wasn’t enough. But brute strength was more than enough to quash the humans.

Human soldiers were absolutely nothing to be feared. They had banded together to manage a few victories here and there, but whenever the demons dug in and began crushing them, they immediately retreated, scurrying away in shame.

It would be one thing if the demons were actually being pushed back, but employing such a strategy under the current circumstances was a joke. That was why Striga had his doubts about the plan, which only intensified his doubts about the one that had petitioned it—Lishbaum.

“Has he lost his nerve? This is seriously ridiculous. That damn fool...”

His dissatisfaction had surpassed its limits. Idle complaints were just overflowing from his mouth. Lishbaum was always going on about his plans, outwitting the humans, and crushing them before they became a threat, all despite being a newcomer among the demon court. He spoke like his will and Nakshatra’s were one in the same,

and pushed his schemes on the others with no hesitation.

There was nothing more frustrating than that. If he had abilities like Ilzarl or Latora, it would be one thing. But for someone with such uncertain powers to put on such a grand farce... There was no way Striga could accept it. Flying along as he continued to curse Lishbaum, one of his kin that he sent ahead for reconnaissance returned.

“There are humans up ahead. They are probably soldiers who got separated from their unit.”

Reading its thoughts, he didn’t get any particularly good news. If they’d stumbled across a full human unit, he was planning to kick them around, but it was just two stragglers. It would have been perfectly fine to leave one or two maggots be, but the idea of changing course to avoid them left a bad taste in his mouth.

And so he planned on continuing forward, trampling the stragglers and slaughtering them while they drowned in despair. He needed to blow off a little steam. The moment he found them, he could take all his pent-up resentment out on them. While fantasizing about that...

“The force that you sent ahead was nowhere to be found.”

“What?”

Striga doubted the information reported to him, and immediately shook his head as he deemed it worthless. If they couldn’t be found, then it likely meant they’d just gotten lost somewhere. The force of demons Striga sent ahead was composed of nothing but brutish sentries with nothing resembling intelligence. Demons who had wings were intelligent enough to use language, but those in the shape of beasts and insects rarely did. Their talent was in their strength alone. It wasn’t hard to think they’d get lost along the winding mountain path, and without the brains to correct their course, they would only end up loitering around.

“They couldn’t possibly have been defeated by those damn humans.”

Striga rejected such worries with a laugh. That would indeed be impossible. If it was true that there were only two stragglers up ahead, there wasn’t even a human army around. And defeating his kin was a feat that would require at least an entire battalion, which was unrealistic to move around in this kind of terrain. It would be a different story if they could fly, but the poor, sorry humans were all earthbound. The only possibility left was that the two stragglers had wiped them out, which was completely laughable.

Lowering his altitude, Striga continued south. An open area eventually came into view. Isolated in the craggy mountains, it was completely flat land without any trees. Just as he’d seen through his kin’s eyes, there were only two men standing there. As expected, they were pitiful stranded soldiers. But Striga had no intention of showing

them any mercy. The desire of Evil God Zekaraia and Demon Lord Nakshatra was the eradication of all humans, after all.

The only mystery is that, despite being discovered, the humans show no sign of surprise...

Despite being approached by a large aerial force of demons, they simply looked to the sky calmly. There was a man in white and a man in black, the former with green hair and the latter with black. That it turned out to be a human and a demi-human was somewhat unexpected, but Striga put the issue out of his mind. Flapping his wings with beats much louder than necessary, he descended.

“Humans, you truly are unfortunate bastards to be left behind by your friends and found by me!”

Striga made that declaration to intimidate them, but neither one said a word. One just stood there calmly, and the other only looked at him with an idiotic expression.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongues? It’s fine to cry and wail like the other humans while begging for forgiveness. Show me that little sideshow you bastards often do on the verge of death.”

“Nah, I’ll pass on doing something so lame.”

The man with the idiotic expression shrugged his shoulders and began laughing scornfully. To speak so frivolously despite being in such a dire situation... Striga was sorely amused at his apparent stupidity.

“Heh heh heh... You sure have a mouth on you, for seeing what you’re up against. I’ll praise your stupid bravado.”

“It’s not bravado, though. Or a bluff, for that matter.”

With that, the man in black grimaced. As he did, he tilted his head slightly and looked to the man in white standing next to him.

“It seems the other side is under some kinda misunderstanding or something, but what do you think? Are they a threat?”

“Hmph, I shall ask you the same in return. Do you feel any threat from this medley of pests? They’re no more than a mosquito swarm on the side of the road, don’t you think?”

Hearing what the man in white said, Striga was struck silent for a moment. Just what were these humans talking about? Were they so afraid that they’d lost their minds? Forget being composed in the face of danger, they were outright insulting the demons—beings that humans shouldn’t *ever* insult.

When that set in for Striga, the flames of his irritation reached new heights. These fools were making fun of demons. They were making fun of him. And they weren’t done yet. The man in black was about to pour even more oil on the fire.

“They’re really just annoying, huh?”

That was it. That was all Striga could handle. The billowing

flames of his irritation consumed him, burning into rage. These humans couldn't live. That couldn't be allowed.

"You bastards, don't go thinking that you'll have quick deaths..."

Striga spat those words, pronouncing death and pain upon the two men. He then raised his arm to the sky. Once he swung it down, his kin would fly into action. With a single gesture, these humans would be swarmed by his kin and completely drained of their blood.

No, that was too halfhearted. He wanted to leave them right on the very brink of death and torment them. That was the punishment to be bestowed on those who made light of demons. All of Striga's anger over Lishbaum had vanished. It was transferred over to these two. He swung his arm down to herald their end, but...

"What—?"

Striga unintentionally let out a gasp at the completely unforeseen development unfolding before his very eyes. After swinging down his arm, his kin should have consumed the two humans in a black swarming cloud. But completely contrary to his expectations, and without any apparent cause, it was his kin that vanished.

What just happened?

While Striga was astonished, the two men began talking.

"You sure defeated them easily."

"Seriously. I was hoping to get to chew them down a little, but... Against such pests, my desires will go unfulfilled, I see."

Their attitudes remained unchanged, and they spoke to each other like they were merely gossiping. They seemed to know what had happened.

"Bastards, just what did you...?"

"Just what you saw. It was nothing. Just what you saw."

With those words, the man in black put on a bold smile. He was repeating that same phrase—"just what you saw"—like it was something meaningful. Just what was he saying? Striga couldn't deduce what those words implied, but...

"Wh-Who the hell are you bastards?! Aren't you just two soldiers that got left behind?!"

As Striga screamed out his doubts, the man in white knit his brow in a dubious manner.

"What? That big one seems to be quite under the wrong impression."

"We're just hanging out here, dude. Waiting for a demon general to show up. But... Hey, when is he gonna show up, anyway? Is one even coming?"

"Who knows? Maybe they won't come after all. This world is nothing but events that defy all prediction, you know."

And so the two carried on with their little exchange. It really and

truly sounded like they felt they were in no danger whatsoever. Surely they were only talking like that because they didn't know Striga was a demon general.

"These lowly humans... To make such a fool of me..."

His burning rage grew to fireball proportions. Letting out a roar like he was venting his anger, he unleashed his bloodlust. Even his remaining trembled as he began changing. Baring his fangs and spreading his wings wide, his face turned pale. The man in black seemed to see something in this transformation.

"Huh? Wai— Ain't this guy a vampire?!"

Indeed, he suddenly began panicking when Striga's true nature was revealed. Recognizing his honorable bloodline, he finally felt the fear that he should have from the very beginning.

"BWAHAHAHAHA! It's too late for you now!"

"Ugh... This kinda sucks..."

The man in black began muttering with a bitter expression as he took a stance. But as Striga said, it was far too late. Transforming his dark power into a wave of bats resembling his kin, he let loose enough of them to cover one's entire field of vision.

"First will be you! NOW DIE!"

A pronouncement of execution. He fired off his Bat Tide. The man in black's mana became highly excited, but the pseudo-kin created by Striga's dark power crushed it. Or rather, Striga thought they would.

A snapping sound rang through the azure sky and blew away the Bat Tide with a shockwave. Then there was another snap, and Striga was blown backward.

"Hmm?"

"G-Guh... What the..."

The attack was completely unexpected, and Striga ate it full-force. But just what was it...? It was a completely incomprehensible attack that threw him for quite a loop. Meanwhile, the man in black simply looked like he'd snapped his fingers. But even he appeared befuddled.

"Huh? Why are you getting damaged by strike magicka? What? You're a vampire, right? Or not? Huh? What the..."

Babbling in a bewildered voice, the man in black looked left and right. Just what did he find so mysterious? Just what was he so concerned about? Was he expecting something more chaotic? The man in white then turned towards him.

"What of it? It's certainly true that the one there has more power compared to the other ones, but... Its only striking feature is its ability to suck blood, you know?"

"Really? Just sucking blood? They're not like... immortal or the ancestors of a forsaken race or anything?"

"I've never heard of such things. And regardless, those wouldn't

be demons, would they?"

"HAH?"

The man in black practically shrieked in confusion. The man in white also looked at him with a curious expression.

"Just what did you think they were?"

"Hang on, hang on, hang on! I mean... You know?! In our world, vampires are beings of the highest echelon. They've lived since ancient times, and are monsters that take several battalion-scaled groups of human heroes and magicians to take down, so, yeah... you know..."

The man in black appeared to be under some incomprehensible misunderstanding, and the man in white shook his head. Seeing this, the man in black stood there perfectly still with his mouth hanging open. Eventually, completely ignoring Striga's own surprise, the man in black's bewilderment turned into irrational anger. It was only then that he turned to Striga.

"What the hell?! You're just a fucking knockoff! Don't fucking scare me like that! I wasted my damn shock moment! Ugh, is that what this is?! You're just putting on a fake show like that Vuishta asshole?!"

The man in black seemed to be angry over his misunderstanding, but what really caught Striga's attention was the name he mentioned.

"Bastard! You know Vuishta?!"

"Know him? I beat the crap outta him a while ago!"

"Wh-What did you just say?! You defeated my fellow demon general?!"

As Striga demanded an explanation, the man in black once more made a dumbfounded expression.

"...Huh?"

"Wh-What is it?"

The man in black went from looking dumbfounded to just plain blank.

"You're a demon general?"

He asked that simple question like he hadn't expected it at all. It was almost like he'd been looking for something, and was disappointed to find it had been staring him in the face all along. And as the flummoxed man in black continued to stare at Striga, the man in white began laughing.

"See? It's just as I said. I told you a demon general would come if we waited here."

"No, no, no! Wipe that triumphant smirk off your face! What's with this timing? Ain't it strange?"

As the man in black criticized him, the man in white only continued to cackle with laughter. Despite the fact that their enemy

was right before them, they were acting like they couldn't even see him, which lit Striga's rage anew.

I'll kill them. I'll put everything I have into killing them.

Making that resolution in his heart, Striga flew up into the skies where he reigned supreme.

"You bastard humans cannot take to the skies! From here, you won't even be able to—"

He was going to say that they couldn't reach him. But even having that demonstrated, both men on the ground looked unfazed.



A cool, refreshing autumn breeze blew through the crystal clear sky overhead. And the reason he felt pity as he looked up at the demon flying there was likely because he was a magician of the Society. Or perhaps it was because he'd inherited his father's wish and was walking down the path to save those who couldn't be saved.

That's right. Magician Yakagi Suimei watched Demon General Striga fly up into the sky and was suddenly overcome by pity. He let out a soft sigh accordingly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just felt bad getting rid of it, you know. From the way it talks, it's totally a proud villain, but in the end, all those things called demons are puppets moved around to fulfill the Evil God's motives, right? Whether or not they have self-awareness— No, precisely because they have self-awareness, I feel bad getting rid of it. Those guys don't have any free will after all."

While still looking up, Suimei expressed his thoughts in a somewhat doleful tone. If every single demon was a pawn in the hand of the Evil God on the chessboard of the world, then their desire to destroy humanity wasn't really theirs. It was just something imprinted in them.

So he couldn't help but see them as pitiful. From their appearance to their thoughts, they were all just designed according to the whims of the Evil God. And since it was impossible to change the way they thought, the only choice left was to put them out of their misery. It wasn't a good feeling.

Just how were they any different from puppets and dolls? If he thought of dolls as pitiful, then his associate who really was a doll might curse him for life... But in this case, there was no way to save them. That inspired a sense of helplessness in Suimei. Perhaps because his complex mental state showed on his face, the dragonnewt next to him spoke with cynicism through his laughter.

"Is that something you should say after making such a fool of him?"

“Well, it’s still an enemy. Provoking them basically just comes automatically. This time... How do I put it? I’m spinning my own wheels...”

When he caught a glimpse of someone who couldn’t be saved like he had just now, regardless of whether it was friend or foe, such feelings would suddenly swell up inside him. Because maybe, just maybe, this was also someone that he needed to save.

“What you are trying to say? Well, I do understand... However, what we must do hasn’t changed, you know?”

“...”

“Are you hesitating?”

“It’s a habit. Whenever I see someone who can’t be saved like this, somehow...”

“In that case, you should instantly put them at peace. In this world, without exception, there are—”

“Stop. Don’t say another word. If you do, I won’t be able to kill that guy.”

Suimei interrupted Eanru. He couldn’t let him finish. Yes, without exception, there are those who couldn’t be saved. But if Suimei heard that now, he would no longer be able to raise his hand. The moment he did, he would be putting out his own dreams. But as he warned Eanru, for some reason, the dragonnewt began laughing. He really was just bursting at the seams with joy.

“How green. You’re so green that it hardly suits the strength you hold.”

“I’m just one among a gathering of people like that. It’s exactly because I’m like this that I became strong.”

As he put that into words, Eanru’s smile turned bold. Just what *was* he enjoying so much? Suimei wasn’t sure what had him in such high spirits, but Eanru suddenly stopped laughing.

“That’s why. That’s exactly why. To save or not to save. Feeling sorry for them like that is purely naive arrogance. If you cling to that with such zeal when you don’t understand your own place in the world, one day, it will be the fire that burns you. Do you understand?”

“Sorry, but I was given that lecture a long time ago. Above all else, I’ve been burned plenty of times already and been through hell for it.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

Saying he would save them, he stuck his neck into the affairs of others and always ended up getting hurt. That was the punishment and price for his arrogance. It was something he made his resolve to face long ago without having to be told. As the two of them silently came to an agreement with those short words, they once more looked

towards the demon general.

He was likely planning to crush them in a single strike. High up in the skies where their arms couldn't reach him, he was accumulating his dark power and kneading it endlessly. But it wasn't like they could get to him from the ground. And since their attacks couldn't reach him, the demon was just steadily and assuredly preparing his coup de grâce. It was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Provided he was actually safe, that is.

"You mere pest. Take my incandescent howl, and depart without leaving even your bones behind."

"Permutato, coagulato, vis existito..."

[Transform, coagulate, become power...]

The words that came out of their mouths were the means to crush the demon general. On one hand was the terrifying pronouncement of a roar, and on the other was a quicksilver blade. But the first real omen to come was the tremendous sound of the dragonnewt inhaling.

"Hoooooooooh..."

It was as if all the air in their surroundings was being sucked into his chest. Seeing Eanru take that posture, Suimei moved to his own position. As he did...

"If you're saying that you have no other goals in life than eradicating humanity, then you are likely all proper puppets of the Evil God. So pitiful. So, so pitiful. But if you plan on bringing harm to others, regardless of whether or not you're demons, then I don't think you deserve to exist. After killing so many of you, I know I'm a bit of an idiot for saying it now, but... My god, I didn't think that the demons would be this far past redemption."

As Suimei spoke with sorrow towards the sky, he readied his mercury katana and closed his eyes.

"The heavenly sky that dyes all in its perfectly clear blue light. The invisible horizon where sea and sky are one. For only this moment in time, that boundary lies within my hand. Sever the blue sky. Its name is the dazzling blue azure."

Holding the mercury katana in both hands, he pointed it to the ground as he chanted his spell. As the chant echoed out mysteriously in the air, a large blue magic circle spread out at his feat, and blue flashes of lightning sparked in the air from his mana. Debris rose from the ground and began soaring towards the sky.

As by his crackling mana extolling his magicka, Suimei's mercury sword inhaled the spectrum from the sky, and his sword turned blue. The enormous surplus of power gave rise to violent gales around him. Trees, rocks, and grass all jumbled together as they were uprooted, torn to shreds, and blown away. Looking up, the blue sky had lost its color, and it now appeared to be a pitch black night. But not for long.

“Bless Blade!”

An incandescent roar and a pure blue brilliance. The mixture of crimson and azure threatened the dark skies in flashes. The flock of demons with Striga at their lead didn’t stand a chance. They were completely obliterated by the purple blast.



In the end, Demon General Striga and all his kin were completely wiped out. The curtain had fallen on them suddenly, but it was the inevitable end to this match. Their opponents were simply too much for them. The winning technique was the combination of a dragon’s roar and the purifying power of the Bless Blade. As the two came together, it became a ruthless attack that reminded Suimei of the violent torrent of lightning breath. From Striga’s point of view, all it would have seemed like was a violent thunder assaulting his ears. Without even the time to cover them, Striga was perfectly helpless before such enormous power.

“Man... That’s just bad luck, huh?”

“Seriously. That demon’s misfortune is truly remarkable.”

Though they found the curtain call to be somewhat humorous, they’d still taken lives, so not even Eanru was smiling right now. It had ended far too quickly. With that, there were only four demon generals left. Or less, if another one had been defeated elsewhere. But there was still something that Suimei found unconvincing. It was what he was thinking about before Eanru showed up. It was still spinning in the back of his mind.

“What’s wrong? Is there something weighing on you?”

In response to Eanru’s question, Suimei turned his back to him. He was looking off in the direction of the main encampment.

“I’m going back. I have a really bad feeling.”

“A bad feeling?”

“Yeah, a bad feeling that I get all too frequently.”

Sounding annoyed, he strengthened his body with magicka and was ready to go. But Eanru still had more to say.

“Then I shall accompany you.”

“Huh?”

“If you have a bad feeling, then it means something that I can enjoy is going to happen. That’s all.”

“You really need to put that shit to bed.”

As Suimei took on a resigned attitude, Eanru once more began letting out a pleasant laugh.

Epilogue: The Greed of Ten

The battle with the demons came to an end, and the calm atmosphere of the imperial headquarters that was there before the surprise attack had started to return.

Because they still had to clean up, most of the people there were still moving about restlessly, but the chaos and danger from the bloodlust in the air had already vanished.

Since the leaders of the Empire and the main force were in fairly good health, they hadn't suffered any major casualties. The soldiers began to collect themselves quickly, and Felmenia's efforts and Reiji's fighting style were all quite effective.

And so, by the overwhelming power Reiji wielded, the defeated demon general, Grallajearus, was captured alive. The core which tied its many consciousnesses together had been cut by Reiji's sword, and its body had half collapsed, but it was left alive to be interrogated.

It could be said that Reiji was not gripped by the need to kill, and proof of that was seen in his reasoning for capturing the demon general. Creating a wall of soldiers around the back of main large tent, it was clear that escape or resistance for their prisoner would not be permitted. Despite Reiji's strike, which should have been impossible in the first place, the defensive measures put in place were mostly just a precaution. Naturally, Reiji and the others were standing at the head of the wall of soldiers, and Reiji had his sword thrust forward. Coming through the crowd, Reanat stepped forward. It seemed his orders to the other groups had finally ended. Gorgan and the other members of the Elite Twelve were together with him, ensuring his safety. He then spoke to Grallajearus.

"Demon general. Why were you able to strike at our rear?"

"Do you bastards think... we would say anything... that would benefit you...?"

"So it seems. There is no way you would just honestly answer, is there? I suppose in that case, it just means we will have to hear it by force."

As Reanat raised his hand overhead, the Elite Twelve began moving. And just as he said, they began hurting it, and were likely preparing to torture it. However, even in that vortex of pain, Grallajearus poured out scorn in a feeble voice as it wheezed.

"Demon general, what is so laughable?"

“It’s funny... Isn’t it obvious... that it’s funny? To think that we would give you information, just from pain... You bastard humans are truly... truly foolish...”

With a sardonic laugh, it showed its intent that it wouldn’t give in. As Grallajearus continued to let out laughter, Jillbert, who had been listening nearby, cut into their conversation.

“Isn’t it pointless to ask that kinda thing? Those demons are beings who think in a different way from us, after all. Even if you threaten them with violence and torture them, they won’t say anything. Fundamentally, they don’t know the concept of holding one’s life dear.”

“That’s right! To grant the dearest wish of Evil God Zekaraia, to build up the honor of Demon Lord Nakshatra, that is the way of us demons! We fear neither pain nor death!”

After letting out a loud shout, a chorus of laughter rang out. That shrill noise was certainly none other than the mad laugh of one on the verge of death. An interrogation was useless. In that case, there was only one thing to do. Just as Reanat looked towards Reiji asking him to finish it off...

“That’s obvious. If it wasn’t the case, they would be more worthless than trash.”

A voice came out of nowhere. It was a voice far more severe than even the rigorous climate of this northern imperial territory. It wasn’t immediately clear whether it was a man or woman’s voice. It had a certain beauty to it. And if it hadn’t spoken such harsh words, it would have been very delightful to listen to. However, that beautiful voice was one Reiji’s party had heard before. No, there was no way they would forget.

“That voice is...”

“It couldn’t be!”

Forgetting he had a sword pointed at Grallajearus, both Reiji and Titania raised their voices as they looked towards the source of the voice. And standing there, with long white hair and the deep red eyes of a fierce god, was Ilzarl.

“You’re...”

“It has been a while, hero. To think that you would defeat Grallajearus. It exceeded my expectations, don’t you know?”

Ilzarl’s baffling statement made it sound as if he was delighted over the defeat of his ally. However, Reiji had different concerns...

“You were watching?”

“Yes, I was spectating. From the very beginning.”

Softly, but with a clearly joyful look, he began laughing. On the other hand, wondering just who Ilzarl was, Reanat turned to Graziella.

“Lyla, who is...?”

“A demon general. A powerful one...”

“That is a demon...?”

His bewilderment was likely due to the fact that Ilzarl looked more human than demon. Reanat, the Elite Twelve, and all the Imperial soldiers began to stir—however, at Graziella’s immediate command, they prepared their magic and drew their swords. And during that, one person stepped forward. It was the one who was able to compete with Ilzarl back in the Self Governed State, Io Kuzami.

“To think you would once more show your face before me, demi-ogre.”

“You have quite the mouth as always, little girl. I will devour you later, so wait there for now.”

As Io Kuzami and Ilzarl were having their little exchange...

“Is it about time that I come out?”

Another voice rang out from nowhere. As they wondered where that voice was coming from, a demon casually appeared from Ilzarl’s shadow. He had blonde hair and bangs lightly hanging over his forehead and a slender face. Complete with a gloomy atmosphere, he appeared to quite closely resemble a human, but he had strange horns on his head and a dark power hanging over him. He was definitely a demon. And as that demon came out, it suddenly took on rather gentlemanly behavior and bowed down.

“For the present, allow me to offer you my congratulations. Hero from the Kingdom of Astel, Reiji Shana. To have reached the blue radiance beyond the distance that you so desired, allow me to give my heartfelt pleasure at the good news.”

“Why do you—”

Know my name, and about the blue radiance. As Reiji was about to ask that, the demon who appeared from the shadow cut him off.

“Aah, I seem to have forgotten my manners. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lishbaum. I am not a demon general, but I am being allowed to fulfill a similar role. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

As he spoke with excessive politeness that one would never use with one’s enemies, Lishbaum smoothly introduced himself. Reiji couldn’t tell if he was just showing off his composed attitude, simply had the free time to introduce himself, or the situation itself was just worthless to him.

“Ilzarl, Lishbaum, why now of all times...?!”

On the other hand, the one to speak up was Grallajearus. There was definitely anger in its voice as it criticized them for arriving so late. However, Ilzarl paid it no mind.

“Grallajearus. Do you resent us for not coming to save you? How foolish. To shift the sin of being too weak onto others, it’s far too

gutless an attitude for a demon general to take.”

“Bastard... You’re saying you’re different from us?”

“Of course. I am not born of the Evil God. It just means my way of thinking is different.”

While Ilzarl and Grallajearus were having a little dispute, Graziella shouted out.

“Everyone take your positions! These are not enemies to be underestimated!”

The soldiers were already prepared for battle, but after receiving Graziella’s command, they knew not to carelessly move. There were two enemies on the level of demon generals before them.

Furthermore, they had just finished going through a difficult battle.

“Mere offerings, you want to have a go?”

As Ilzarl fearlessly pointed his fangs at them, Reiji yelled back.

“It won’t go like last time!”

“Don’t get conceited just because you defeated Grallajearus. Well, that female mage and dwarf over there both seem like they’d be worth eating, though...”

“I’m your opponent!”

As Ilzarl focused on Felmenia and Jillbert, Reiji pointed his orichalcum sword at him. And just as the battle was about to start...

“I don’t particularly mind going at it with you here, but— Hmm?”

“Heh. A hindrance, is it—”

Just as Ilzarl and Lishbaum seemed to notice something, they suddenly leaped back. And immediately following that, from the clear blue sky, a lightning-like flash struck the ground between Reiji and Ilzarl. A tremor occurred from the powerful strike, and a cloud of dust kicked up. And eventually, from within that dust, a single man with green hair and silver horns — Eanru, appeared.

Seeing those white clothes which resembled traditional Japanese clothing, Jillbert suddenly yelled out in anger.

“You damn dragonnewt! Why the hell did you come here?! This ain’t your damn post, you know?!”

“Eh, it’s nothing. I ended up finishing up over there quickly, you see. I heard something interesting was going to happen, so I came running over. But to think it would be on this level, huh!”

Saying that, Eanru’s fearless smile grew even more. It was like he struck gold. As Reiji and the others were completely confused by the appearance of someone they didn’t know, a voice they did recognize came running over.

“Don’t just run off on your own, dammit!”

“I found something interesting, so my reflex kicked in.”

And in the direction Eanru was speaking, they could see Suimei’s figure. Seeing this, Reiji yelled towards him.

“Suimei!”

“Oh great, I just came back, and now it seems something outrageous is—”

And just as Suimei was trying to talk, a powerful rage began swelling from the other side. It was coming from the direction that Reiji and the others were just confronting, from where the one who resembled a fierce god, Ilzarl, was standing.

His bright eyes further flared up, and he let out a hair-raising pressure that shocked up everyone’s skin. And the one on the receiving end of that gaze filled with anger was definitely the green haired dragonnewt, Eanru.

“Bastard, the Silver Dew...”

“Ha, HAHAAHAHA! How long it’s been! It’s truly been a long time, maneater! To think you’re still alive. Contrary to expectations, you’re quite tenacious! What? Did you have cold meals in the back regions of the north to survive?”

This fierce god’s anger was matched with a pleasant laugh from Eanru. Seeing that attitude, the sound of Ilzarl grinding his teeth could be heard as he expressed his severe anger. As for Reiji and the others, seeing an opponent who held boundless composure against them break down in rage left them completely perplexed. After coming here, unknown people were just appearing on their own one after the other, so it couldn’t be helped that they were confused. In any case, as Eanru showed Ilzarl a ferocious smile.

“How fortunate. To think I would be able to meet you. Though it is unexpected that you are together with those pests.”

“I am also fortunate. I can finally return the debt that I owe you.”

The two shot off sparks at each other. One was showing joy at their reunion—no, rematch—while the other was filled with rage while wiping aside his drool. From the way they were talking, they already knew each other well, and it was certain that there was some history between them. As their tremendous fighting spirits clashed against one another, Reiji casually called out to Suimei out of habit.

“Suimei... Suimei?”

He called out, but Suimei didn’t reply. As Reiji looked at him, he was simply staring at a single point. Reiji thought Suimei was bound in place by the terrifying collision of fighting spirit—but in truth, Suimei was completely ignoring it. Yes, because a far greater existence than those two was right before his eyes.

“Is something the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Did something that unexpected happen?”

Suddenly, a voice came out from nowhere, and Reiji and the others couldn’t tell who was speaking for a moment. All they could hear was a deep, cold, but youthful voice of a man. But Reiji

remembered hearing that voice somewhere before. It hadn't been all that long since he was just talking to the owner of that voice. Yes, the one who was talking was the demon named Lishbaum.

"Why are you..."

It was a puzzled and shocked mutter. Just as he said, it was a voice gripped by fear like he had seen a ghost. And the one who did so was none other than Suimei, who had completely stiffened up as he looked at Lishbaum.

"Why are you here...? No, why are you alive... Kudrack the Ghosthide?"

"Kudrack?"

"Ghost...hide?"

As Suimei said that name towards Lishbaum, both Reiji and Ilzarl reacted. They both knit their brows at the name they had never heard before. It was a completely different name from the one Lishbaum introduced himself to Reiji with. And with a completely different tone than when he spoke with Reiji, the deep and cold voice of the man rang out.

"It's been a long time, Yakagi Suimei. Shocked? I bet you must be. I should have been obliterated by you back then, after all."

As if satisfied by Suimei's shocked face, Lishbaum let out a weak, stifled laugh. And in response...

"...What does this mean? Why are you alive? Why do you have that form?"

"That is the obvious question, isn't it...? But unraveling it so simply just isn't amusing."

"Don't fucking joke around!"

Suimei yelled strongly with wrath, but Lishbaum didn't answer him. On the other hand, Ilzarl looked at Lishbaum with a skeptical gaze.

"Lishbaum, is that offering a damn acquaintance of yours?"

As Ilzarl asked, in a complete change, Lishbaum replied in an excessively polite tone like he did earlier.

"Yes. That is the man who served as the trigger for me coming to this place."

"The trigger to bring you here, you say?"

"Yes."

As Lishbaum nodded, Ilzarl couldn't understand. On the other hand, Suimei's anger increased from being ignored, and he let out an even louder voice than before.

"Kudrack... Fucking answer me!"

"Don't be in such a rush, Starfall. It simply ended up that I'm fighting on the demons' side. Isn't that all you need to know? What else is there that you need other than that? The goal that I mean to

achieve in battle... Don't you already understand it completely?"

That was certainly true. Suimei's history with this man was deep, and he knew it well. Lishbaum's, no, Kudrack the Ghosthide's reason for fighting. No matter where he was or what he was doing, there was only one goal. In that case...

"...Then why are you on the demons' side fighting in such a poor way? If your goal is the same as it was before, just what the hell are you thinking, making them move like that? Are you seriously motivated?"

"Of course I am. Now, just as before, my dearest wish has not changed."

"Then why...?"

"Am I using tactics which pointlessly waste demons, is it? Let's see. I'm certainly doing that. Surely, my actions right now must seem baffling to you."

In a complete change from his faint smile, Lishbaum began laughing gloomily with a shadow behind his words. And after calming down...

"I guess it's fine to unravel it here. It seems you're not the only one who wants to hear it, after all."

Saying that, Lishbaum glanced over at Ilzarl and began explaining.

"Starfall. I do believe you already know this, but the demons are a race born of the Evil God. Just like all divinity, the Evil God pressures other faiths antagonistically while increasing the number of pawns it has. And in building up its power to interfere with the world, it ever so gradually increases the number of its pawns even more. That could even be considered its job."

"You're saying it's the same as any other god?"

"That's right. However, even if it does well in increasing its number of pawns, eventually a problem comes up. The pawns born of its weak power in the beginning are unable to keep up with the changes surrounding them. And gradually, they become more and more obsolete. But even if they create new ones, eventually the numbers cap out, and seats remain filled by the weaker, previously created ones. Then—"

To improve that situation, just what should one do?

Just from that one word, Suimei figured it all out, and shock appeared on his face as he muttered.

"Wha— Then it's not about increasing resources. You're working to open up spots after reaching capacity...?"

"That's exactly it. So to speak, it's like a strategy-type adventure game. At the beginning, you can only afford poor soldiers due to the low municipal and military levels. But as you progress in level, you can gather much better soldiers. Then, in that case, it's just a matter of

where to send those low level soldiers. It's just the fate of useless demons is all."

Suimei continued to gaze in wonder at the lich. The fate of the demons. After saying so much, that answer wasn't difficult to arrive at. In a strategy game, one would either just overwrite the data of those soldiers while in the city building part, or just send them on a suicide attack to free up space. But this wasn't a game, it was reality. Even so, if that was being overlooked...

"So they're not your allies..."

"Didn't you already know? As I desire to purify the world, it's impossible for me to have any true allies. All living things, great or small, are the same muck and filth to me, after all."

"But you still follow something weaker than you?"

"That's not the case. That which I follow is an existence worthy of my devotion."

That— From that word, it was either the Evil God, or perhaps the Demon Lord. In any case, it was unrelated to the matter at hand. As Suimei finished asking everything he wanted to ask, all that was left was to head towards the decisive battle, and he kneaded his mana. He already didn't care at all about concealing it before Reiji.

In the worst case, it was possible that they would be completely annihilated right where they were. As Suimei began gathering mana that surpassed the force with which Felmenia was doing so earlier, Felmenia yelled out to him.

"Suimei-dono!"

"Stay back! This guy isn't some half-assed demon! He's one of those immortal liches I told you about earlier!"

Hearing those words, Felmenia was able to figure it out. Last time they had a lesson, when they were talking about the ether body, he told her about those who released themselves from death. As she swallowed her saliva hard, he could see the tension in her face. As the air further filled with the thirst for blood, even Ilzarl had a surprised face. As for Lishbaum, who had all that mana pointed towards him, he was stroking his jaw.

"You don't have any allies you can depend on today, you know? Alzbayne's doll princess, Gerard the Melkia, and Beatorex aren't here, right?"

"Even so, I won't step down."

"That's right. That's what makes you Starfall. An opponent like you who's bad at giving up is most suitable to me."

Saying that, Lishbaum took on an attitude like he was accepting the challenge, but in the next instant, his attitude suddenly changed.

"Well, I didn't come here to fight today, though."

"What?"

As if waiting for Suimei's question, Lishbaum made a broad grin that spread to the corners of his face. And as he turned around, forming ranks in front of his gaze was the wall of imperial soldiers. It was foolish to even ask what he was about to do. He was the Greed of Ten. He had no compassion towards humans. He had no compassion towards any living being.

"You can't be— STOOOOOOOOOOOP!"

"Phase Severance."

Immediately following that keyword, the air was divided in two. A boundary line appeared in the air and slipped the two pieces apart. It was just as if everything in the air was drawn over with a pen in a single line and separated top from bottom. And the portion covered by that line was the majority of the imperial encampment. It was none other than the imperial soldiers. And they fell. Heads. Heads. Heads. In an instant, heads all over went tumbling to the ground. It was just like a really bad joke. The slipping piece of air was right at the level of a human's neck, and everything above it, the tents, the hills behind it, everything was split in two and slipped to the side.

"Ri... Ridiculous."

"No way..."

The only ones to escape from harm were those near Suimei, his companions, Reiji's party, Eanru and Jillbert, Reanat, and the Elite Twelve. Seeing that excessively bizarre scenery and the dreadful power which manifested it, Graziella and Reiji muttered, completely dumbfounded. And during that, the one to yell and raise his voice, as one would expect, was Suimei.

"KUDRACK, YOU FUCKEEEEEER!"

"What are you getting so angry for, Starfall? I saved them, you know? I saved those caught in the fetters of suffering that is this earthly life, and this many of them! So many of them! Death is salvation! It's the salvation beyond all other means!"

"Doing that kinda crap! Do you intend on acting like a fucking god?!"

"A god? That's wrong. I'm not that kind of being. From beginning to end, I am a human who bears the sins of the world. I will take up the sins of all living beings! Yes! The one who bears all sin! Haha, Hahaha, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!"

Lishbaum let out a truly insane laugh.

"That which saves all living things! I'll show that I can remove all the muck! Throughout the entire world! Without leaving a scrap!"

As Lishbaum finished loudly yelling into the air, he made a complete change, as if a switch was flipped.

"Now then, it's over. Let's withdraw. Aah, I forgot something."

"Lish...baum."

“Grallajearus, your role has come to an end. Go back to His side.”
“BASTAAAAAAAAAAAAARD!”

“What are you so angry for? It’s the Evil God’s side, you know? You have finished your duty and are now returning to where you came from. I don’t think there’s anything greater than that for you.”

“Do you think Nakshatra-sama would permit such a—”

“The lord told me to do as I like. The weak have no qualifications to live in this world. As a demon, you understand that, do you not?”

Hearing that, Grallajearus could no longer talk. A demon who should have no fear of death was feeling irrepressible feelings of despair at being abandoned by the Demon Lord.

“Heh, heh... FUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

His loud laughter once more rang out. And at the same time, his magicka was activated, and Grallajearus was crushed by the two phases pushing together, annihilated. Thus, all demons aside from Lishbaum and Ilzarl vanished from the imperial encampment.

“Now then, I will yield this as a victory to the hero and the Empire. Well, this is more of a draw due to injury, though.”

Though to him, it wasn’t an injury at all. They were going to recreate all the demons. If it was their plan from the beginning to have them all vanish, it didn’t matter how many of them died.

“Kudrack...”

“Yakagi Suimei. I will settle the score with you one day. However, this is not the stage for that. At any rate, I shall prepare a suitable battlefield for our fight. Until then, run at full speed as you chase the mysteries, and polish that dream that you all desire so much.”

And then, Lishbaum hummed those words...

Those who call forth tears, remember. In this world, there is no rain of sorrow that cannot be cleared away. Those who carry anguish, remember. In this world, there is no blaze of pain that cannot be extinguished. We magicians of the Society, in the name of the Magicka King Nestahaim, for the sake of granting the wish that anybody desires...

“Yes. No matter where I am, I will show you that I can erase everything altogether. I will free all living beings from the vortex of pain that is living, and save them all—”

Leaving behind those intoxicated and distorted words, the Greed of Ten, the lich Kudrack the Ghosthide vanished together with Ilzarl into a liminal world between phases.

Afterword

To everybody who read this volume, it's been a long time. Gamei Hitsuji here.

Now that we've hit volume 7, I don't expect we'll be having any new readers jumping in this far along in the series, so hello to all you returning readers! But how about that, huh? *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!* has finally reached its seventh volume! I never thought I would get this far at first, so even I am surprised. This is all thanks to you, my readers, and Overlap. Truly, thank you all very much.

And then, and then, and then! Starting this volume, we have a new illustrator in charge of the artwork! It's Ao Nekonabe-san, who's active in both the light novel and the social game scene. Thank you very much for the gorgeous and cool pictures! That illustration of tiny Lefille is just so cute. It tickles me to no end, gehehe...

Allow me to thank everyone who helped bring volume 7 safely out into the world. To the chief editor S-sama, the illustrator Ao Nekonabe-sama, the designer cao-sama (I've been writing Horiehideaki up until now!), and the proofreading company Oraido-sama, truly, thank you very much.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Stories

It's Cooking Time

On a certain day at the Yakagi residence, Suimei had just emerged from his study. On his way down to the living room on the first floor, he couldn't help noticing an abnormality in the kitchen as he walked by.

"...Huh? What're they doing in there?" he mumbled.

"Oh, it seems the two of them are preparing a meal," answered Felmenia, who was already in the living room.

The "abnormality" in question was that Lefille and Liliana—neither of whom were regular fixtures in the kitchen—seemed to be up to something. Felmenia said they were preparing a meal, but that would be a Yakagi residence first. They'd never cooked anything together before, so hearing that they were suddenly attempting it now for some reason inspired a certain anxiety in Suimei's gut.

"Uh... is that really alright?"

"There is no need to worry, Suimei-dono. Look, Lefille is with her."

"Yeah, but... Lefi-san is kinda tiny right now."

Despite Suimei's express concern, Felmenia didn't seem worried. She was normally the one to handle mealtimes for the household, so perhaps she was just happy to be off-duty for once. She was simply enjoying her time lounging in the living room while her friends did the cooking for her.

Menia-san, you're so pure... So, so pure...

She was perfectly at peace, but Suimei was still concerned. It wasn't like he didn't have *any* faith in them, but this was the first he'd ever heard of either Lefille or Liliana cooking. Moreover, when Lefille shrank, she became proportionally klutzy, which only amplified his anxieties further. In an attempt to put himself at ease, he listened in on what was happening in the kitchen.

"As expected... of Lefille. That cut... was splendid."

"Wasn't it? Now it's time to show these vegetables the sword skills I've cultivated. Here we go."

It sounded like they were in the middle of chopping ingredients. Encouraged, Suimei peeked in through the cracked door... but what he saw confounded him.

"...Huh?"

Lefille was holding a knife in her right hand and a vegetable in her left. But there was no cutting board—or anything close to resembling one—anywhere nearby. Just what was she planning on doing?

“Hiyah!”

Lefille let out a cute cry as she tossed the vegetable into the air and sliced right through it—just like a swordsman performing a street sideshow for tips would. Liliana observed this all with a joyful look.

“Amazing. They all have... the same shape.”

“Right? Severing vegetables is but a trifle to me.”

However...

“Right?” My ass! Use a chopping board, damn it! That’s food! Besides, that’s cutting, not severing!

Suimei had used magicka to slice up potatoes for chips before, but he hadn’t had much of a choice without a mandolin or the like. But this... He didn’t even know where to start.

“Next is... my turn. I will fry up... the cut vegetables.”

Or so Liliana declared, but Suimei didn’t see a frying pan or oil anywhere nearby. Just what was she planning on doing? Before he could fully process that thought, a terrible feeling besieged Suimei.

Wait, she’s not...

“Oh Fire... Dance.”

AAAAAAAAAH!

Just as Suimei’s mental alarm bells were sounding, Liliana chucked the vegetables in the air and used magickal fire to scorch them... It was all over in the blink of an eye.

“Mm... Yes, splendid.”

Or so Lefille said. And it did have that appearance—the vegetables looked to be nicely fried. Despite being burned by magickal fire, they were perfectly crisp. However...

The flavor’s dead... That’s it. They killed it.

Quite some time ago, the Society’s resident monster professor had gotten Suimei to drink tepid coffee that had been created in mass quantities several hundred years prior. It had an indescribable tastelessness, and all around just wasn’t good. When Suimei’s father had tried it too...

“There’s a certain romance to such uses of magicka, but nothing romantic can come of it...”

That was his reaction in the moment, but what he said applied to many things. Beautiful, simple results would never come from anything so overwrought. So no matter how thoroughly steeped in magicka a magician was, that didn’t equate to cooking skill. The craft of making things by hand was an entirely different art, and trying to produce something loving like that with magicka was no different

than using a machine. And as Suimei pondered such nuance, the girls were moving full steam ahead. It seemed they'd gone from frying vegetables to making soup.

"I-It's salty! Did we put too much in?!"

Aaah— Actually, that's a fairly common problem when it comes to seasoning things.

But as that thought crossed Suimei's mind, in an attempt to correct their mistake, Liliana...

"Honey... Let us add some honey."

Stoooooooooop! That's the worst thing you can dooooo!

Before Suimei could even raise a word of objection, Liliana lifted up the jar of honey.

Water! You're supposed to use water! Even I know that! That's a rookie mistake, you two! And proof neither one of you belongs in the kitchen! Ack, no, don't do it! Don't do it, damn it! Aaaaah! NOOOOO!

Suimei's inner despair was all in vain, and he watched helplessly as most of the honey jar was emptied into the cooking pot. After stirring it in, the girls gave the new soup a taste test.

"Eww..."

"Th-This is..."

It was far more disgusting than they'd expected. The two of them were both squirming in agony. However, Lefille still clung to the prospect of victory.

"No, we're not finished yet! There's still hope—a secret ingredient! They say cooking is all about the love you put into it!"

"Then let us... add all the love we can!"

And so the two girls began cheering for the soup and telling it to "get tasty." It was really and truly an adorable sight, but all Suimei saw was two witches casting a curse over their cauldron.

To Hold That Magnificent Sacrament Once More

One evening, several days after Reiji and the others had retrieved the Sacrament from the self-governed state, Reiji was gazing at it in the courtyard of the inn where they were staying.

"Hrmmm..."

As he let out a troubled groan, Titania appeared behind him.

"What is the matter, Reiji-sama?"

"Oh, er, it's nothing. I was just wondering how to turn this into a weapon again."

"As I suspected... Does this mean you are unable to turn it into a weapon freely?"

Reiji solemnly nodded in response to Titania's refined voice. Ever since the Sacrament had returned to accessory form, he'd been

contemplating how he might coax it into transforming into a sword again. But whether he focused his mana, concentrated, or prayed, it showed no signs of listening whatsoever. And that was the predicament he was still left in now.

Titania said nothing. They stood there in silence for a moment before another voice came calling from behind them.

“Then why don’t we just recreate the situation?”

“Princess Graziella?”

“You wore that same long face all through dinner, so I figured you must be dwelling on it.”

“Ummm... Are you maybe worried about me?”

“Yes, w-well, something like that,” Graziella said, turning away awkwardly.

Ignoring her reaction, Titania brought the conversation back on track.

“Just now, Your Imperial Highness, you spoke of ‘recreating the situation.’ What did you mean by that?”

“O-Oh, that? That’s... I meant when Reiji p-protected me... If we create another situation where I’m in danger and he...”

“No. Denied.”

Graziella was blushing for some reason, but Titania rejected her proposal without batting an eye.

“Why not?”

“Must you ask?! That is absolutely out of the question!”

“If you’re jealous Reiji came to my rescue, then just honestly...”

“I-I am not particularly jealous! M-M-Make no mistake!”

And while Titania and Graziella were squawking at each other...

“I have a brilliant plan.”

“Io Kuzami-san?”

The next to appear in the courtyard was indeed Io Kuzami. And, of course, the first thing that came out of her mouth was something about a supposedly brilliant plan, but...

“What specifically would you have us do?” Titania inquired.

“Is that not already obvious? We must simply practice. Practice, I say.”

“I hear you emphasizing practice, but I do not understand what specifically you intend for us to do.”

“Then you would do nothing? Nothing begets nothing, you know. Nothing will come of spending an eternity brooding over it.”

“That is certainly true, but...”

Without the slightest hint to go on, they didn’t even know what they should be working towards. Nevertheless, Io Kuzami continued.

“In any event, this is my fiancé’s wish. Shall I offer my advice?”

“What should I do?”

“Hold that and scream. Yes, scream to the heavens.”

“S-Scream...?”

“Unleash the cry of your heart. Here, allow me to offer you an example.” Io Kuzami then turned to the night sky in high spirits and screamed, “Oh Last Excalibur! The sacred sword that swoops down to my hand to save this world! Answer my call and display thy pure radiance right here and now! Manifest as my blade...! Well, something like that.”

“That was just a flurry of flowery language and weird names... Are you saying that’s what I should do?”

“Of course. As I said, unleash the cry of your heart. Stretch properly, take a deep breath, and go!”

“What, this is practical now? Why is this sounding like sports club training all of a sudden?”

Reiji was sorely mistaken. This wasn’t anything other than full-on chuunibyou.

“Then, if you would prefer, shall we say... Fill your words with your overflowing pathos?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks...”

As Reiji let out a groan, Graziella offered her opinion.

“Everything else aside, I do believe it’s true that words are required to activate it. Think back on what that elf told us in the temple.”

“Now that you mention it, she did talk about reciting something, huh...”

That much was true, but it wasn’t like they could figure out the magic combination just by shouting arbitrary words. That being said, trying was really the only option they had right now.

“Gaaah, to hell with it! Oh Sacrament! Answer my wish and become a weapon!”

Silence.

“Ugh...”

All that answered Reiji as he screamed into the night was a piercing pain in his chest. It would have been fine if it had defied their expectations and transformed after all that, but the emotional damage from it doing nothing at all was a heavy toll.

“That’s no good. The darkness of your wording is insufficient. Try adding in some foreign words too.”

“Foreign words?!?”

“But of course. Does not the stylishness of foreign words stir the very depths of your soul?”

“That only applies to the souls of a very small fraction of people...”

“Oh, my fiancé... When you first heard the name of the Lachesis

Meter, did you not think it was incredibly cool?"

"Huh? Well, now that you mention it... Yeah, I did."

"This is no different."

"You think?"

Reiji muttered to himself in resignation as he looked up to the night sky once more. And then...

"Oh Sacrament! Devour my soul and awaken! Sing your requiem éternel! Crystallize in my hands and manifeeeeeest!"

Silence.

"Ugggh..."

As expected, the Sacrament still didn't transform. The pain in Reiji's chest only increased proportionally to the embarrassment of what he'd just dared to shout. When it was all said and done, he dropped to his knees on the spot and turned bright red.

"Um, Reiji-sama...? Shall we leave it at that for tonight?"

"Tia, please, I'm begging you. Don't look at me like that. It hurts my heart."

"Well... How do I put it, Reiji? There's no need to hurry."

"Ugh... Graziella-san, I'm sorry to say it, but your sympathy is like being stabbed with a cold knife..."

Reiji was reduced to bitter moaning in a tearful voice. As for Io Kuzami, who brought this all on...

"Good grief. That level of passion is simply inadequate. If you truly wish to attain power, you must cast aside all your shame and self-respect."

"But... my pride..."

Titania and Graziella helped the distraught Reiji back to the inn. Once they were gone...

"Oh hero, I'm afraid there is no way to obtain what you seek other than to be in a fight for your life. That object surpasses the realm that I am able to assist you in, after all," Io Kuzami muttered in an unusually meek tone as she looked up to the moon.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue: The Possessed Woman

Chapter 1: At the Yakagi Residence

Chapter 2: Bad News Always Comes With Bad Weather

Chapter 3: Their Respective Battles

Chapter 4: So That I Can Be Myself

Epilogue: The Greed of Ten

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

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by Gamei Hitsuji

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